

Le Queux William

The Golden Face: A Great 'Crook' Romance



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CHAPTER I

PRIVATE AND PERSONAL

In order to ease my conscience and, further, to disclose certain facts which for the past year or two have, I know, greatly puzzled readers of our daily newspapers, I have decided to here reveal some very curious and, perhaps, sensational circumstances.

In fact, after much perplexity and long consideration, I have resolved, without seeking grace or favor, to make a clean breast of all that happened to me, and to leave the reader to judge of my actions, and either to condemn or to condone my offenses.

I will begin at the beginning.

It has been said that service in the Army has upset the average man's chances of prosperity in civil life. That, I regret, is quite true.

When I, George Hargreave, came out of the Army after the Armistice, I found myself, like many hundreds of other ex-officers, completely at a loose end, without a shilling in the world

over and above the gratuity of between two and three hundred pounds to which my period of commissioned service entitled me.

Grown accustomed during the war, however, to fending for myself and overcoming difficulties and problems of one sort and another, I at once set to work to look about for any kind of employment for which I fancied I might be fitted. After answering many advertisements to no purpose, I one day happened upon one in *The Times* which rather stirred my curiosity.

It stated that a gentleman of good position, who had occasion to travel in many parts of the world, would like to hear from a young man with considerable experience in motor driving. The applicant should not be over thirty, and it was essential that he should be a gentleman and well educated, with a knowledge of foreign languages if possible; also that he should be thoroughly trustworthy and possessed of initiative. The salary would be a very liberal one.

Application was to be made by letter only to a certain box at the office of *The Times*.

I wrote at once, and received some days later a reply signed "*per pro* Rudolph Rayne," asking me to call to see the advertiser, who said he would be awaiting me at a certain small *hôtel-de-luxe* in the West End at three o'clock on the following afternoon.

I arrived at the highly aristocratic hotel at five minutes to three, and was conducted to a private sitting-room by a page who, on ushering me in, indicated a good-looking, middle-aged

man seated near the window, reading a newspaper and smoking a cigar.

The gentleman looked up as I approached, then put down his paper, rose, and extended his hand.

“Mr. George Hargreave?” he inquired in a pleasant voice.

“Yes. Mr. Rudolph Rayne, I presume?”

He bowed, and pointed to a chair close to his own. Then he sat down again, and I followed his example.

“I have received hundreds of replies to my advertisement,” was his first remark, “and the reason why your application is one of the few I have answered is that I liked the frank way in which you expressed yourself. Can you sing?”

“Sing?” I exclaimed, startled at the unexpected question.

“Sing,” he repeated.

“Well, yes, I do sing occasionally,” I said. “That is to say, I used to at the sing-songs in France at sergeants’ messes, and so on. But perhaps you mightn’t consider it singing if you heard me,” I ended lightly.

“Very good, very good,” he observed absent-mindedly. “And you can drive a Rolls?”

“I can drive a Rolls and several other cars as well,” I answered. “I was a driver in the R. A. S. C. early in the war.”

Suddenly he focused his gaze upon me, and his keen, penetrating gray eyes seemed to pierce into my soul and read my inmost thoughts. For perhaps half a minute he remained looking at me like that, then suddenly he said shortly:

“You are engaged, Mr. Hargreave. Your salary will be six hundred pounds a year, paid monthly in advance, in addition to your living and incidental expenses. I leave for Yorkshire by the midday train from King’s Cross to-morrow, and you will come with me. Good afternoon, Mr. Hargreave. By the way, you might take this suit-case with you, and bring it to the station to-morrow,” and he pointed to a small suit-case of brown leather on the floor beside his chair.

The whole interview had not lasted three minutes and I went away obsessed by a feeling of astonishment. Mr. Rayne had not cross-questioned me, as I naturally had expected him to do, nor had he asked for my credentials. In addition he had fixed my salary at six hundred pounds, without even inquiring what wages I wanted.

Obviously a character, an oddity, I said to myself as I passed out of the hotel.

Had I suspected then that Mr. Rudolph Rayne was the sort of “oddity” I later found him to be, I should have refused to accept the situation even had he offered me two thousand a year.

Though, during the interview, my attention had been more or less concentrated on Mr. Rayne, I had not been so deeply engrossed as to fail to notice an exceptionally beautiful, dark-eyed girl, who had entered while we had been speaking and who was seated on a settee a little way off. She, too, had stared very hard at me.

Mr. Rayne was accompanied on that journey to Yorkshire

by the pretty dark-eyed girl who was his daughter Lola, and by his valet, a very silent, stiff-necked, morose individual, whose personality did not attract me. He seemed, however, to be an exceptionally efficient person, so far as his duties were concerned, and on our arrival at the little wayside station about twelve miles beyond Thirsk, where we had changed trains, he proceeded to take charge of the luggage, all but the suit-case which I still carried.

Outside the little station a magnificent Rolls limousine, colored a dull gray, awaited us, and when the luggage had all been put on it, Mr. Rayne surprised me by asking me to take the wheel then and there.

“My chauffeur left last week, but Paul will show you the road,” he said, as the valet seated himself beside me. “Overstow is about ten miles off.”

I don't know why it was, but that girl's dark eyes seemed to haunt me. She was just behind me with her father, and twice when I had occasion to look round to ask Mr. Rayne some question or other, I found her gaze fixed on mine, which, foolishly I will admit, disconcerted me.

Mr. Rayne himself addressed me only once of his own accord during the drive, and that was to ask me again if I sang.

“Why the dickens does he want to know if I sing?” was my mental comment when I had replied that I sang a little, without reminding him that he had put the same question to me on the previous day. For an instant the thought flashed across me that

perhaps my new employer had some kink in his brain to do with singing; and yet, I reflected, that seemed hardly likely to be the case with a man who in all other respects appeared to be so exceptionally sane.

I was still cogitating this, when the car sped round a wide curve in the road and beyond big lodge gates a large imposing mansion of modern architecture came suddenly into view about half a mile away, partly concealed by beautiful woods sloping down to it from both sides of the valley. Slackening speed as we came near the lodge, I was about to stop to let Paul alight to open the gates, beyond which stretched the long winding avenue of tall trees, when a man came running out of the lodge and made haste to throw the gates open.

My first surprise on our arrival at Overstow Hall – and I was to have many more surprises before I had been long in Mr. Rayne’s service – was at finding that though my employer had quite a large staff of servants, there was not a woman amongst them! Several guests were staying in the house, including a middle-aged lady, called Madame, whose position I could not exactly place, though she appeared to be in charge of the establishment, in charge also of Lola.

Towards ten o’clock next morning the footman came to tell me that Mr. Rayne wanted to see me at once in the library.

“He’s in one of his queer moods this morning,” the young man said, “so you had better be careful. His letters have upset him, I think.”

I thanked the lad for his hint, but on my way to the library, a room I had not yet been in, I missed my bearings, entered a room under the impression that it might be the library, and had hardly done so when the sound of men's voices in a room adjoining came to me – the door between the rooms stood partly open.

“Are you certain, Rudolph,” one of the men was saying, “that this new chauffeur of yours is the man for the job?”

“Have I ever made a mistake in summing up a man?” I heard Rayne answer. “I always trust my judgment when choosing a new hand.”

Where, before, had I heard the first speaker's voice? I knew that voice quite well, yet, try as I would, I could not for the life of me place it.

“Yes,” the first speaker replied; “but, remember, in this case we are running an enormous risk. If the least hitch should occur –”

They lowered their voices until their talk became inaudible, and presently I heard one of them go out of the room. After waiting a minute longer I left the room and went along the short passage, which I now knew must lead to the room where I had heard them talking.

Rayne was alone, standing on the hearthrug with his back to the big, open firegrate.

“Did you send for me, sir?” I inquired.

“I did, Hargreave,” he replied in a friendly tone. “I sent for you because I want you to go to Paris to-night. You will take with you

the suit-case you still have in your possession, and as you will go by a trading steamer from Newcastle, the voyage will take you some days. The suit-case contains valuable documents, so you must on no account let it out of your sight, even for a minute, from the time you leave here until you hand it over personally to the gentleman I am sending you to – Monsieur Duperré. He is staying at the Hôtel Ombrone, that very smart and exclusive place in the Rue de Rivoli. He will give you a receipt, which you will bring back to me here at once, coming then by the ordinary route. You won't go by train to-day to Newcastle; you will drive yourself there in the Fiat. Paul will go with you and drive the car back."

He went on to give me one or two minor instructions, and then ended: "That's all, Hargreave."

I was walking back along the passage when Rayne's pretty daughter Lola came out of the room I had first entered. She must have come out expressly to meet me, because when close to me she stopped abruptly, glanced to right and left, and then asked me quickly in an undertone:

"Is my father sending you on any journey, Mr. Hargreave?"

Again her wonderful dark eyes became fixed upon mine, as they had done on the previous day during the drive from the railway station.

"Don't try to deceive me," she said earnestly. "You will find it far better to confide in me."

The words so astonished me that for the moment I could not

reply. Then, all at once, a strange feeling of curiosity came over me. Why all this secrecy about the suit-case? I mentally asked myself. And what an odd idea to send me to Paris by that long roundabout sea route! What could be the reason?

“I am not deceiving you, Miss Rayne,” I said.

She only smiled and turned abruptly away.

Then, for the first time, I found myself wondering what could be these precious documents Rayne had told me the suit-case contained? That the suit-case was locked, I knew! He had not unlocked it since he had placed it in my charge in London two days before.

My employer gave me some money, and I started two hours later in the Fiat. As I sped along the broad road from Thirsk south towards York, with Paul beside me silent as ever, I could not get thoughts of Lola out of my mind.

Once more I saw her gazing up at me with that peculiar, anxious expression I had noticed when we had met in the passage, and I regretted that I had not prolonged our conversation then, and tried to find out what distressed her.

Several times I spoke to Paul, but he answered only in monosyllables.

We reached Newcastle in plenty of time, for the boat was not due to sail before early next morning, and I felt relieved at being at last rid of my uncongenial companion.

I had an evening paper in my pocket, and, to while away the time, I lay in my narrow berth and began to read. Presently my

glance rested upon a paragraph which stated that two days before a dressing-case belonging to Lady Norah Kendrew disappeared in the most extraordinary manner from the hotel in London where she was staying. Exactly what happened had been related to the enterprising reporter by Lady Norah herself.

“My dressing-case containing all my jewelry was locked and on a table near my bed,” she said. “I went out of the room soon after half-past ten this morning, my maid, who has been with me eight years, remaining in the room adjoining to put some of my things away – the door between the rooms remained ajar, she says. Whether or not the jewel-case was still there when she herself went out to lunch at about one o’clock she cannot say, as she did not go into my bedroom again. She shut the door behind her when she went out of the sitting-room into the corridor, and locked it. I first missed the jewel-case when I returned to my room at about a quarter past three in the afternoon. The contents are worth twenty thousand pounds. It seems hardly possible that anybody could have entered the bedroom unheard while my maid was in the sitting-room with the door between the two rooms ajar, so my belief is that it must have been stolen between the time she went to lunch and the time I returned. I am offering a big reward for the return of the jewel-case with its contents intact.”

The paragraph interested me because of the hotel where the robbery – if robbery it was – had taken place, and the fact that I had happened to be in that hotel on the very day of the robbery!

“Ah, well,” I remember saying to myself, “if women will be

so careless as to leave valuable property like that unguarded they must expect to take the consequences.”

Then my thoughts wandered from the newspaper, and I found myself wondering what Lady Norah Kendrew might be like – if she were young or old, plain or pretty, married or unmarried. And I suppose naturally that train of thought brought Lola once more into my imagination. I had, remember, to all intents, hardly seen her, and she had spoken to me only twice. Yet her personality literally obsessed me. That I was foolish to let it I fully realized. But how many of us can completely master our moods, our impulses and our emotions on all occasions?

The weather at sea remained fine, yet I found that long, slow voyage most tedious. I had nothing to do but read, for I could not disregard Mr. Rayne’s strict instructions that I must on no account let the suit-case out of my sight, and in consequence I could not leave my cabin.

I remember looking down at the suit-case protruding from under the berth and thinking it curious that documents should weigh so heavy. There must be a great many of them, I reflected, but even so...

I bent down and pulled the suit-case right out and lifted it. Indeed it was heavy – very heavy!

Then I began to think of something else.

I had the cabin to myself, which was pleasant, and I spent most of the day stretched out in my bunk. Oh, how I longed every hour for the terribly boring voyage to come to an end!

It was a lovely morning when at last we steamed into the estuary of the Seine, and I shall never forget how beautiful the river and its banks looked as I peered out through my port-hole and we crept up towards Rouen. My meals had all been served in my cabin during the voyage, as I could not well have taken the suit-case with me into the saloon.

Now I felt like a prisoner about to be released.

Mr. Rayne had told me to stop at the post-office in Rouen on my way from the boat to Paris, as I might, he said, find a letter or a telegram awaiting me. I had managed to pass the suit-case through the Customs, and now my heart beat faster as a letter was handed to me, for I recognized Lola's handwriting; I had seen it only once before – that was on a letter she had asked me to post for her.

I hurriedly tore open the envelope, and this was what I read:

“Private. I have suspicion that the suit-case you have you should get rid of at once. Destroy this!”

Undated and unsigned, the letter bore no address. At once thoughts and conjectures of all sorts came crowding into my mind. Could it be that the suit-case contained stolen jewelry and not documents?

Instantly I guessed why Rayne had sent me to Paris with it by that roundabout route. He must either himself be the thief, I concluded, or an accomplice in the theft, and by placing the stolen property in my charge and smuggling it out of England by a circuitous route...

One reflection led quickly to another. Paul, the valet, no doubt knew about his master's private life – possibly was in his confidence. And if Rayne had committed the robbery he must be a professional crook. In which case, should the whereabouts of the stolen property be discovered, I should be arrested as an accessory to the crime! Clearly I had no time to lose if I wanted to safeguard myself. Even now the police, with their wonderful acumen, might be on my track!

I reached Paris at last, and as my taxi swung round from the Place Jeanne d'Arc into the Rue de Rivoli I began to feel extremely nervous.

In reply to my inquiry at the bureau of the smart Hôtel Ombrone I was told that I could be given a bed. Monsieur Duperré? Ah, monsieur had just gone out, but would be back soon, most likely.

I had been given the key of my room, and was about to enter the lift, when I noticed seated on a settee in the vestibule a well-dressed woman whose face seemed familiar. And then in a flash I recognized the lady who had been at Overstow Hall on the day I had arrived there!

She did not recognize me, or I concluded she did not, and naturally it was no business of mine to make any sign of recognition.

I had been in my room, I suppose, about two hours when the telephone bell rang.

“That Mr. Hargreave? The bureau speaking. Monsieur

Duperré has come in and is coming up to you now.”

A minute later somebody knocked, and I called “Come in!” Then, to my amazement, who should enter but my old company commander in France in the early days of the war – Captain Vincent Deinhard, who later in the war had been court-martialed for misappropriating canteen funds and been subsequently cashiered! Altogether his Army record had been an exceedingly bad one.

Instantly I remembered the voice. It was Deinhard I had heard in conversation with Rayne at Overstow Hall!

He stood stock-still, staring at me.

“Why, Hargreave!” he exclaimed at last. “What in the world are you doing here?”

“I am Mr. Rayne’s chauffeur and general servant now, captain,” I replied. “Mr. Rayne told me to inquire on my arrival here for Monsieur Duperré and hand him that suit-case,” and I pointed to it.

He glanced quickly at the door, to make sure that it was shut, then, looking at me oddly, he said in a low voice:

“I am Duperré, Hargreave. You must forget that my name was ever anything else – I got myself into trouble in the Army, you remember – and you must forget that too – and that we have ever met before. So you are his new chauffeur, eh?” he went on, now talking naturally. “It never occurred to me that ‘Hargreave,’ the new chauffeur, would turn out to be the Hargreave who served under me for two years!” and he laughed dryly.

Then, without a word, he went over to the suit-case and picked it up.

“Come along to my room,” he said.

CHAPTER II

ROOM NUMBER 88

I accompanied him along the corridor to a private sitting-room at the end, numbered 88, and adjoining which was a bedroom. There he placed the suit-case upon the table, and taking a piece of paper scribbled a receipt.

“Better post that on to Rayne at once,” he suggested. “My wife will be here in a moment. We’ll have lunch later on.”

All that had already happened had so astonished me that I was only slightly surprised at finding a few moments later that the lady I had seen at Overstow Hall, and again a couple of hours before in the vestibule of the hotel, was Duperré’s wife. He must, I think, have told her that we had met before, for she seemed in no way astonished at Mr. Rayne’s chauffeur being presented to her.

I found her a pleasant woman, well-read, well-educated and widely travelled. She was, too, an excellent conversationalist. And yet, all the time we were talking, I could not help thinking of Lola, and wondering why Duperré’s wife should be in such evidence at Overstow Hall, indeed, apparently in authority there, also why Lola seemed to be so afraid of her.

Half an hour later I posted the receipt to Rayne, and later we all three lunched together in the restaurant. We took our coffee

upstairs in the private room, when Duperré said, *à propos* of nothing, suddenly looking across at his wife:

“Hargreave may be of great use to us, Hylda.” Then, addressing me again, he said, lowering his voice and glancing at the door:

“In becoming associated with ‘The Golden Face,’ Hargreave, you are more fortunate than you may think. He’s a man who can, and who will, if he likes, help you enormously in all sorts of ways – you will find that you are more to him than a mere chauffeur. In fact, we can both help you, that is, if you fall in with our plans. Our only stipulation will be that you do what we tell you —*without asking any questions*. You understand – eh?”

“I suppose,” I said, smiling, “that by ‘The Golden Face’ you mean Mr. Rayne?”

“Yes. He’s called ‘Golden Face’ by his intimates. I forgot you didn’t know. He got the nick-name through going to the Bal des Quatre Arts, here in Paris, wearing a half-mask made of beaten gold.”

By that time I had become convinced that both Rayne and Duperré were men with whom I should have to deal with the utmost circumspection.

The only person I had met since I had engaged myself to Rayne in whom I could, I felt, place implicit confidence, was Lola.

When we had finished our coffee, Duperré excused himself, saying that he had some letters to write, and suggested that

his wife should accompany me for a taxi drive in the Bois. This struck us both as a pleasant manner in which to spend the afternoon, therefore Madame retired to her room, reappearing a few moments later wearing a smart cloak and a wonderful black hat adorned with three large handsome feathers.

She proved herself a very amusing companion as we drove out to Armenonville, where we sat out upon the lawn, she sipping her *sirap* while I smoked a cigarette. She knew Paris well, it seemed, and was communicative over everything – except concerning Rudolph Rayne.

When I put some questions to her regarding my new employer, she simply replied:

“We never discuss him, Mr. Hargreave. It is one of his rules that those who are his friends, as we are, preserve the strictest silence. What we discover from time to time we keep entirely to ourselves, and we even go to the length of disclaiming acquaintanceship with him when it becomes necessary. So it is best not to be inquisitive. If he discovers that you have been making inquiries he will be greatly annoyed.”

“I quite understand, Madame,” I replied with a meaning smile. That she was closely connected with the deep-laid schemes of Rudolph Rayne was more than ever apparent. But why, I wondered, was Lola so palpably beneath her influence?

My companion was about thirty-eight, though she looked younger, with handsome, well-cut features, and possessing the *chic* of a woman who had traveled much and who knew how to

wear her clothes. There was, however, nothing of the adventuress about her. On the contrary, she had the appearance of moving in a very select set. She was English without a doubt, but she spoke perfect French.

I mentioned Lola, but she said:

“Remember what I have just told you about undue inquisitiveness, Mr. Hargreave! You will find out all you want to know in due course. So possess yourself in patience and act always with foresight as well as with discretion.”

I chanced to raise my eyes at that moment, when I noticed that a well-dressed, black-mustached Frenchman, who wore white spats, while passing along the terrace of the fine *al fresco* restaurant had halted a second to peer into Madame's face, no doubt struck by her handsome features. She noticed it also but turned her head, and spoke to me of something else. A woman knows instinctively when she is being admired.

The position in which I now found myself, employed by a man who was undoubtedly a crook of no mean order, caused me considerable trepidation. When I had assumed the responsibility of that innocent-looking suit-case I never dreamt that it contained Lady Norah Kendrew's stolen jewels, as it did, otherwise I would certainly never have attempted to pass it through the Customs at Rouen. But why and how, I wondered, had Lola's suspicions been aroused? Why had she warned me?

Rayne had probably sent messengers with stolen property to France by that route before, knowing that, contrary to the shrewd

examination at Calais, the officers of certain trading ships and the *douaniers* were on friendly terms.

When again I raised my eyes furtively to the Frenchman in the white spats I was relieved to find that he had disappeared. My fears that he might be an agent of the Sûreté were groundless. The afternoon was delightful as we sat beneath the trees, but Madame suddenly recollected an engagement she had with her dressmaker at five o'clock, so we reëntered our taxi and drove back to the Porte Maillot and thence direct to the hotel.

We found the door of the sitting-room locked, but as Madame turned the handle Duperré's voice was heard inquiring who was there.

"Open the door, Vincent," urged his wife.

"All right! Wait a moment," was the reply.

We heard the quick rustling of paper, and after a lapse of perhaps a minute he unlocked the door for us to enter.

"Well? Had a nice time – eh?" he asked, turning to me as he reclosed the door and again locked it.

I replied in the affirmative, noticing that on the table was something covered with a newspaper.

"I've been busy," he said with a grin, and lifting the paper disclosed a quantity of bracelets, rings, pendants and other ornaments from which the gems had been removed. During our absence he had been occupied in removing the stolen jewels from their settings.

"Yes," I laughed. "You seem to have been very busy, Vincent!"

Beside the bent and broken articles of gold lay a little pile of glittering gems, none of them very large, but all of first quality.

“Lady Norah wouldn’t like to see her treasures in such a condition, would she?” laughed Duperré. “We shall get rid of them to old Heydenryck, who is arriving presently.”

“Who is he?”

“A Dutch dealer who lives here in Paris. He’s always open to buy good stuff, but he won’t look at any stones that are set. Rayne’s idea was to sell them, just as they were, to a dealer named Steffensen, who buys stuff here and smuggles it over to New York and San Francisco, where it is not likely to be traced. But I find that Steffensen is away in America at the moment, so I’ve approached the Dutchman. Heydenryck is a sly old dog. Unlike Steffensen, he buys unset stones because they are difficult to identify.”

I bent and examined the glittering little pile of diamonds, rubies, emeralds and sapphires which had been stolen from the hotel in London.

“Look here, Hargreave,” said Duperré. “I want you to help us to get rid of this,” and he pointed to the broken jewelry.

“How?” I asked dismayed, for I confess that I feared the discovery. To be thus intimately associated with a band of expert crooks was a new experience.

“Quite easily,” he replied. “I’ll show you.” Then turning to his wife, he said: “Just bring Lu Chang in, will you, Hylda?”

Madame passed into the next room and returned with a small

Pekinese in her arms.

“Lu Chang is quite quiet and harmless,” laughed Duperré as his wife handed the dog to me.

As my hands came in contact with the animal’s fur I realized that it was dead – and stuffed!

Duperré laughed heartily as he watched my face. I confess that I was mystified.

He took the dog, which had probably been purchased from a naturalist only that day, and ripping open the pelt behind the forelegs he quickly drew out the stuffing. Then into the cavity he hurriedly thrust the broken rings and pendants.

I watched him with curiosity. It seemed such an unusual proceeding. But I recollected that I was dealing with strange associates – people whom I afterwards found to be perhaps the most ingenious crooks in Europe.

“Poor Lu Chang,” exclaimed my old company commander with a laugh. “If you drown him he won’t feel it!”

Duperré watched the expression of surprise upon my face as he packed the whole of the broken jewelry into the dog.

“Now what I want you to do, Hargreave,” he said, “is to drown Lu Chang in the Seine. Lots of people in Paris, who are not lovers of dogs, are flinging them into the river because of the new excessive tax upon domestic pets. You will just toss Lu Chang over the Pont Neuf. The police can’t interfere, even though they see you. You will only have put the dog out of the world rather than pay the double tax.”

He watched my natural hesitation.

“Isn’t he a little dear!” exclaimed Madame, stroking the dog’s fur. “Poor Lu Chang! He won’t float with the gold inside him!”

“No,” laughed Duperré. “He’ll go plumb to the bottom!”

It was on the tip of my tongue to excuse myself, but I remembered that I was in the service of Rudolph Rayne, the country squire of Overstow, and paid handsomely. And, after all, it was no great risk to fling the stuffed dog into the river.

I am a lover of dogs, and had the animal been alive nothing would have induced me to carry out his suggestion.

But as it had been dead long ago, for I saw some signs of moth in the fur, and as I was in Paris at the bidding of my employer, I consented, and carrying the little Peke beneath my arm I walked along the Quai du Louvre to the old bridge which, in two parts, spans the river. Just before I gained the Rue Dauphine, on the other side, I paused and looked down into the water. An agent of police was regulating the traffic on my left, and he being in controversy with the driver of a motor-lorry, I took my opportunity and dropped the dog with its secret into the water.

Two boys had watched me, so I waited a moment, then turning upon my heel, I retraced my steps back to the Hôtel Ombrone, having been absent about twenty minutes.

As I entered Room 88, three Frenchmen, who had ascended in the lift, followed me in.

Madame was writing a letter, while Duperré was in the act of lighting a cigarette. We started in surprise, for next instant we

all three found ourselves under arrest; the well-dressed strangers being officers of the Sûreté. One of them was the man in the white spats who had been attracted by Madame in the Bois.

“Arrest!” gasped Duperré.

As he did so, an undersized, rather shabbily-dressed man of sixty or so put his head into the door inquisitively, and realizing that something unpleasant was occurring, quickly withdrew and disappeared. I saw that he exchanged with Duperré a glance of recognition combined with apprehension, and concluded that it was the man Heydenryck, the dealer in stolen gems.

Meanwhile the elder of the three detectives told us that they had reason to believe that jewelry stolen from a London hotel was in our possession, and that the place would be searched.

“Messieurs, you are quite at liberty to search,” laughed Duperré, treating the affair as a joke. “Here are my keys!”

At once they began to rummage every hole and corner in the room as well as the luggage of both Duperré and his wife. The brown suit-case which was in the wardrobe in the bedroom attracted their attention, but when unlocked was found to contain only a few modern novels.

At this they drew back in chagrin and disappointment. I knew that the broken gold was safely at the bottom of the Seine, but where were the gems?

It was all very well for Duperré to bluff, but they would, I felt convinced, eventually be found. The police, not content with searching the personal belongings of my friend, took up

the floor-boards, and even stripped some paper from the wall and carefully examined every article of furniture. Afterwards they went to my room at the end of the corridor and thoroughly searched it.

At last the inspector, still mystified, ordered two taxis to be called, as it was his intention to take us at once before the examining magistrate.

“Madame had better put on her hat at once,” he added, bristling with authority.

Thus ordered, she reluctantly obeyed and put on her big feathered hat before the glass. Then a few moments later we were conducted downstairs and away to the Prefecture of Police.

After all being thoroughly searched, Madame being examined by a prison wardress, we were ushered into the dull official room of Monsieur Rodin, the well-known examining magistrate, who for a full hour plied us with questions. Duperré and his wife preserved an outward dignity that amazed me. They complained bitterly of being accused without foundation, while on my part I answered the police official that I had quite accidentally come across my old superior officer.

Time after time Monsieur Rodin referred to the papers before him, evidently much puzzled. It seemed that Madame had been recognized in the Bois by the impressionable Frenchman who I had believed, had been attracted by her handsome face.

That information had been sent by Scotland Yard to Paris regarding the stolen jewels was apparent. Yet the fact that the

locked suit-case only contained books and that nothing had been found in our possession – thanks to the forethought of Duperré – the police now found themselves in a quandary. The man in the white spats whom we had seen in the Bois identified Madame as Marie Richaud, a Frenchwoman who had lived in Philadelphia for several years, and who had been implicated two years before in the great frauds on the Bordeaux branch of the Société Générale.

Madame airily denied any knowledge of it. She had only arrived in Paris with her husband from Rome a few days before, she declared. And surely enough the visas upon their passports showed that was so, even though I had seen her at Overstow!

How I withstood that hour I know not. In the end, however, Monsieur Rodin ceased his questions and we were put into the cells till the next morning.

Imagine the sleepless night I spent! I hated myself for falling into the trap which Rayne, the crafty organizer of the gang, had so cleverly laid for me. Yet was I not in the hands of the police?

But the main question in my mind was the whereabouts of that little pile of gems.

Next day we were taken publicly before another magistrate and defended by a clever lawyer whom Duperré had engaged. It was found that not a tittle of evidence could be brought against us, and, even though the magistrate expressed his strong suspicions, we were at last released.

As we walked out into the sunlight of the boulevard, Duperré

glanced at his watch, and exclaimed:

“I wonder if we shall be in time to catch the train? I must telephone to Heydenryck at once.”

Five minutes later he was in a public telephone-box speaking to the receiver of stolen goods.

Then, without returning to the Hôtel Ombrone, we took a taxi direct to the Gare de Lyon.

As Duperré took three first-class tickets to Fontainebleau, the undersized, grave-faced old man whom I had seen at the moment of our arrest followed him, and also took a ticket to the same destination. We entered an empty compartment where, just before the train moved off, the old man joined us.

He posed as a perfect stranger, but as soon as the train had left the platform my companion introduced him to me.

“I called last night and saw what had happened. Surely you have all three had a narrow escape!” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” said Duperré. “It was fortunate that Hylda recognized the *sous-inspecteur* Bossant in the Bois. She put me on my guard. I knew we should be arrested, so I took precautions to get rid of the gold and conceal the stones.”

“But where are they?” I asked eagerly, as the train ran through the first station out of Paris. “They are still hidden in the hotel, I suppose. We’ve all been searched!”

Madame laughed merrily, and removing her hat, unceremoniously tore out the three great feathers, the large quills of which she held up to the light before my eyes.

I then saw to my amazement that, though hardly distinguishable, all three of the hollow quills were filled with gems, the smaller being put in first.

At the detective's own suggestion she had put on her hat when arrested, and she had worn it during the time she had been searched, during the examination by the magistrate, and during her trial!

Duperré was certainly nothing if not ingenious and his *sang-froid* had saved us all from terms of imprisonment.

Madame replaced the valuable feathers in her hat, and when we arrived at Fontainebleau we drove at once to the Hôtel de France, opposite the palace, where we took an excellent *déjeuner* in a private room.

And before we left, Duperré had disposed of Lady Norah's jewels at a very respectable figure, which the sly old receiver paid over in thousand-franc notes.

I marveled at my companion's ingenuity, whereupon he laughed airily, replying:

"When 'The Golden Face' arranges a *coup* it never fails to come off – I assure you. The police have to be up very early to get the better of him. His one injunction to all of us is that we shall be ready at all times to show clean hands – as we have to-day! But let's get away, Hargreave – back to London, I think, don't you?"

The whole adventure mystified and bewildered me. It was a mystery which, however, before long, was to be increased a hundredfold. Alas! that I should sit here and put down my guilt

upon paper!

CHAPTER III

THE MAN WITH THE HUMP

One morning I called at Rayne's luxurious chambers in Half Moon Street, when he expressed himself most delighted at the result of our visit to Paris.

"I want you to-morrow morning to drive Lola and Madame up to Overstow," he said. "Better start early. Call for them at the hotel at nine o'clock. The roads are good, so you'll have a pleasant journey. I'll get home by train at the end of the week."

At this I was very pleased, for Lola with her great dark eyes always sat beside me. She could drive quite well, and was full of good humor and a charming little gossip. Hence I looked forward to a very pleasant run. The more I saw of the master-crook's daughter the more attracted I became by her. Indeed, though she seemed to regard me with some suspicion – why, I don't know – we had already become excellent friends.

The month of September passed.

We had all spent a delightful time at Overstow. Rayne had given two big shoots at which several well-known Yorkshire landowners had been present, while I had taken a gun, and Lola, Madame and several other ladies had walked with us. Lola and I were frequently together, and I often accompanied her on long walks through the autumn-tinted woods.

Madame's husband had only spent a week with us, for he had, I understood, been called to Switzerland on "business" – the nature of which I could easily guess.

At the end of the month we were back in London again.

One evening I had dined at the Carlton with Lola, her father and Madame, and the two ladies having gone off to the theater, he took me round to the set of luxurious chambers he occupied in Half Moon Street.

When we were alone together with our cigars, he suddenly said:

"I want you to go out for a run to-night – to Bristol."

"To Bristol! To-night?" I echoed.

"Yes. I want you to take the new 'A. C.' and get to the Clifton Suspension Bridge by two o'clock to-morrow morning. There, in the center of the bridge, you will await a stranger – an elderly hunchback whose name is Morley Tarrant. He'll give you, as *bonâ fides*, the word 'Mask.' When you meet him act upon his instructions. He is to be trusted."

The tryst seemed full of suspicion, and I certainly did not like it. The evening was bright and clear, and the run in the fast two-seater would be enjoyable. But to meet a man who would give a password savored too much of crookdom.

He quickly saw my hesitation, and added:

"Now, Hargreave, I ought not to conceal from you the fact that there may be a trap. If so, you must evade it and escape at all costs. I have enemies, you know – pretty fierce ones."

Again, for the hundredth time, I debated within myself whether I dare cast myself adrift from the round-faced, prosperous-looking cosmopolitan who sat before me so full of good humor and so fearless.

I had been cleverly inveigled into accepting the situation he had offered me, but I had never dreamed that by accepting, I was throwing in my lot with the most marvelously organized gang of evil-doers that that world had ever known.

Other similar gangs blundered at one time or another and left loopholes through which the police were able to attack them and break them up. But Rudolph Rayne had flung his octopus-like tentacles so far afield that he had actually attached to him – by fear of blackmail – an eminent Counsel who appeared for the defense of any member of the circle who happened to make a slip. That well-known member of the Bar I will call Mr. Henry Moyser, a lawyer whose fame was of world-wide repute, and who was employed for the defense in most of the really great criminal trials.

I sat astounded when, by a side-wind, I was told that Mr. Moyser would defend me if I were unlucky enough to be arrested. Certainly his very name was sufficient to secure an acquittal.

The journey from Pall Mall to Clifton had been a long and rather tiring one, and as I sat in the swift two-seater half-way across the high suspension bridge, I smoked reflectively as I gazed away along the river where deep below shone a few twinkling lights. Across at Clifton I could see the row of street

lamps, while above the stars were shining in the sharp frosty air, and in the distance I could hear the roar of an express train.

The bell of Clifton parish church struck the half-hour, but nobody was in sight, and there were no sounds of footsteps in the frosty air. Though so near the busy city of Bristol, yet high up on that long bridge, that triumph of engineering of our yesterday, all was quiet with scarce a sound save the shrill cry of a night-bird.

If it were not that I loved Lola I would gladly have resigned the position which had already become hateful to me. Somehow I felt vaguely that perhaps I might one day render her a service. I might even extricate her from the dangerous circumstances in which she was living in all innocence of the actual conspiracies in which her father was engaged. Who could know?

As far as I could gather, Lola was much puzzled at certain secret meetings held at Overstow. Her father's friends of both sexes were shrouded in mystery, and she was, I knew, seeking to penetrate it and learn the truth.

I had already satisfied myself that the gang was a most dangerous and unscrupulous one, and that Rayne and his friends would hesitate at nothing so long as they carried out the plans which they laid with such innate cunning in order to effect great and astounding *coups*—the clever thefts and swindles that from time to time had held the world aghast.

I suppose I must have waited nearly half an hour when suddenly there fell upon my ear uneven footsteps hurrying along towards the car, and in the light of the street lamp I distinguished,

hurrying towards me, a short, elderly man, somewhat deformed, with a distinct hump on his back.

“You’re Mr. Hargreave, aren’t you?” he inquired breathlessly, with a distinct Scottish accent. “I’m Tarrant! I’m so sorry I’m late, but Rudolph will understand. I’ll explain it to him.”

And he was about to mount into the seat beside me.

I put out my arm, and peering into the man’s face, asked:

“Is there nothing else, eh?”

“Nothing,” he replied. “Why? You are here to meet me. Rudolph sent you down from London.”

I was awaiting the prearranged word that would show the hunchback’s *bonâ fides*.

I gave him another opportunity of giving the password, but he seemed ignorant of it.

Next second, my suspicions being aroused, I sprang down, and crying:

“Look here, old fellow! I fancy you’ve made a mistake!” I struck him familiarly upon the back.

His hump was *soft*! In that instant I detected him as an impostor – a Scotland Yard detective – without a doubt!

Fortunately for me my brain acts quickly. But it was not so quick as his. He gave a shrill whistle, and in a flash from nowhere three of his colleagues appeared. They ran around the car to hold it up.

For a few seconds I found myself in serious jeopardy.

I sprang into the driver’s seat, switched on the self-starter, and

just as one of the detectives tried to mount beside me, I threw down among my assailants a little dark brown bomb the shape of an egg, with which Rayne had provided me in case of emergency.

It exploded with a low fizz and its fumes took them aback, allowing me to shoot away over the bridge and down into Bristol, much wiser than when I had arrived.

The arrangement of that password in itself showed how cleverly Rudolph Rayne was foresighted in all his plans. He always left a loophole for escape. Surely he was a past-master in the art of criminality, for his fertile brain evolved schemes and exit channels which nobody ever dreamed of.

The squire of Overstow, who was regarded by the wealthy county people of Yorkshire as perfectly honest in all his dealings, and unduly rich withal, attracted to his table some of the most exclusive hunting set, people with titles, as well as the *parvenus* "impossibles" who had bought huge places with the money made out of the war. The "County" never dreamed of the mysterious source of Rudolph Rayne's unlimited income.

After traveling through a number of deserted streets in Bristol, I at last found myself upon a high road with a signpost which told me that I was on my way to Wells, that picturesque little city at the foot of the Mendip Hills. So, fearing lest I might be followed, I went "all out" through Axbridge and Cheddar, until at last I came to the fine old cathedral at Wells, which I knew quite familiarly. Near it was the Swan Hotel, at which, after some difficulty, I aroused the "boots," secured a room, and placed the

car in the garage.

It was then nearly half-past three in the morning, and my only object in taking a room was to inform Rayne by telephone of my narrow escape. Rayne was remaining the night at Half Moon Street, while Lola and Madame Duperré were at the Carlton. We had all come up from Overstow a couple of days before, and two secret meetings had been held at Half Moon Street.

Of the nature of the plot in progress I was in entire ignorance. They never let me completely into their plans; indeed, I only knew their true import when they were actually accomplished.

The half-awake "boots" at the Swan indicated the telephone, and a quarter of an hour later I was speaking to Rayne in his bedroom in London. Very guardedly I explained how nearly I had been trapped, whereupon I heard him chuckle.

"A very good lesson for you, Hargreave!" he replied. "Our friends are apparently on the watch, so get back to London as soon as you can. You'll be here at breakfast-time. Leave the car at Lloyd's and come along to me. Good luck to you!" he added, and then switched off.

The Lloyd's garage he mentioned was in Bloomsbury, a place kept for the accommodation of motor-thieves. Many a car which disappeared quickly found its way there, and in a few hours the engine numbers were removed and fresh ones substituted, while the bodies were repainted and false number-plates attached.

As I put down the telephone receiver, it suddenly occurred to me that already the Bristol police might have telephoned a

description of the car along the various roads leading out of the city. Therefore it would be too risky to remain there. Hence, as though in sudden decision, I paid the “boots” for my bed, and five minutes later was again on the road speeding towards London.

I chose the road to Salisbury, and after “blinding” for half an hour, I stopped and put on the false number-plates and license with which Rayne always provided me.

It was as well that I did so, for in the gray morning as I went through Salisbury a police-sergeant and a constable hailed me just as I turned into St. John Street, near the White Hart, calling upon me to stop. I could see by their attitude that they were awaiting me, therefore pretending not to hear I quickened my pace and, knowing the road, soon left the place behind me.

Again, in a village some ten miles farther on, a constable shouted to me as I continued my wild flight, hence it seemed apparent that a cordon had been formed around me, and I now feared that to enter Winchester would be to run right into the arms of the police.

The only way to save myself was to abandon the car and get back to London by rail. As I contemplated this I was already passing beside the high embankment of the South Western Railway, where half a mile farther on I found a little wayside station. Therefore I turned the car into a small wood, and destroying my genuine license and hiding the genuine number-plate, I took the next train to Winchester, and thence by express to Waterloo after a very wild and adventurous night. That I had

been within an ace of capture was palpable. But why?

I was in the service of the man who controlled that vast criminal organization which the police of Europe were ever trying to break up. But why should I be sent to meet the mysterious hunchback Tarrant on Clifton Bridge?

“There seemed to have been a little flaw in our plans, Hargreave,” said the alert, good-looking man as I sat with him in his cosy chambers in Half Moon Street that morning. “The police evidently got wind of the fact that old Morley was meeting you, and Benton tried to impersonate him. I know Benton. He’s always up against me. He might have succeeded had he made the hump on his back a hard one, eh?” he laughed, as though rather amused than otherwise.

“But he didn’t know the password,” I remarked in triumph.

“No! It was fortunate for you that I had arranged it with old Morley,” said the man with the master-mind. “One must be ever wary when one treads crooked paths, you know. The slightest slip – and the end comes! But, at any rate, last night’s adventure has sharpened your wits.”

“And it has cost us the ‘A. C.’!” I remarked.

“Bah! What’s a motor-car more or less when one is working a big thing!” he exclaimed. “Never let ideas of economy stand in your way, or you’ll never make a fortune. In order to make money you must always spend money.”

I often recollected that adage of his in later days, when the pace grew even hotter.

Rayne paused for a few minutes. Then he said:

“I’ve already heard from old Morley on the telephone half an hour ago. He was on the bridge and watched the fun. Then he discreetly withdrew and went back to his hotel in Clifton. He declares that you acted splendidly.”

“I’m much gratified by his testimonial,” I said.

“I’ve arranged that he shall meet you to-night here in London – outside the Three Nuns Hotel at Aldgate. Go to Lloyd’s and get a car. At half-past seven it will be dark. Drive up, go into the bar and have a drink. You’ll find him there and recognize him by his deformity. Outside he will mention the password and you will drive him where he directs. That’s all!”

And the man who had, on engaging me, so particularly wanted to know if I could sing, and had never asked me to do so, dismissed me quite abruptly, as was his habit. His quick alertness, keen shrewdness and sharp suspicion caused him to speak abruptly – almost churlishly – to those about him. I, however, now understood him. Yet I wondered what evil work was in progress.

He had often pitted his wits against the most famous detective inspector, the great Benton, who had achieved so much notoriety in the Enfield poisoning case, the Sunbury mystery in which the body of a young girl shop-assistant had been found headless in the Thames, the great Maresfield drug drama of Limehouse and Mayfair, and the disappearance of the Honorable Edna Newcomen from her mother’s house in Grosvenor Gardens.

Superintendent Arthur Benton was perhaps the most wideawake hunter of criminals in the United Kingdom. As chief of his own particular branch at Scotland Yard he performed wonderful services, and his record was unique. Yet, hampered as he was by official red-tape and those regulations which prevented his men from taking a third-class railway ticket when following a thief, unless they waited for weeks for the return of the expenditure from official sources, he was no match for the squire of Overstow, who had a big bank balance, who moved in society, official, political and otherwise, and who actually entertained certain high officials at his table.

From a man in the Department of the Public Prosecutor at Whitehall, Rayne often learnt much of the inner workings of Scotland Yard and of secret inquiries, for a civil servant at a well-laid sumptuous table is frequently prone to indiscretion.

Arthur Benton was a well-meaning and very straight-dealing public servant with a splendid record as a detector of crime, but against money and such influence he could not cope. Indeed, more than once Rayne declared to me that he intended evil against Benton.

“Yet I rather like him,” he had said when we were discussing him one day. “After all, he’s a real good sportsman!”

So according to Rayne’s orders I met the hunchback Tarrant at the Three Nuns Hotel at Aldgate. I had taken another car from Lloyd’s garage – a Fiat landaulette, stolen, no doubt – and in it, at the old man’s directions, I drove out to Maldon, in Essex, where

at a small house outside the town I found, to my surprise, Rayne already awaiting us.

What, I wondered, was in progress?

CHAPTER IV

THE FOUR FALSE FINGERS

The house outside Maldon proved to be a newly built, detached, eight-roomed villa in a lonely spot on the high road to Witham. As I idled about it, I smelt a curious odor of melting rubber. Apparently the place had been taken furnished, but with what object I could not guess. Tarrant was a queer, rather insignificant-looking old fellow with a shock of white hair and a scraggy white beard.

Both he and Rayne were closeted together in the little dining-room for nearly two hours, while I sat in the adjoining room. I could hear them conversing in low tones, and the smell of rubber warmed by heat became more pungent. What game was being carried on? Something very secret without a doubt. I thought I heard the sound of a third man's voice. Indeed, there might be a third person present, for I had not been admitted to the room.

At last, leaving Rayne there, I drove the old man on to Witham, where I left him at his own request at a point near the wireless telegraph station, and turning, went back to the thieves' garage and there left the car.

I did not see Rudolph Rayne again for several days, but according to instructions I received from Madame Duperré, I went by train up to Yorkshire and awaited their arrival.

From Duperré, who arrived three days after I had got to Overstow, I gathered that Rayne had suddenly been called away to the Continent on one of his swift visits, “on a little matter of business,” added Vincent with a meaning grin.

We were smoking together in the great old library, when I told him of my narrow escape on Clifton Bridge.

“Yes,” he said. “Benton is always trying to get at us. It was sly of him to impersonate old Morley. I wonder how he got to know that you were meeting him? Someone must have betrayed Rayne. I have a suspicion who it may be. If he has, then woe betide him! Rudolph never forgives an enemy or a blunderer.”

I tried to get from Duperré the reason why the hunchback had met Rayne in such secrecy, but he would divulge nothing.

Next day his wife and Lola returned, and that same evening as I sat with the latter in the chintz-covered drawing-room – for though I had been engaged as chauffeur I was now treated as one of the family – I had a delightful chat with her.

That she was sorely puzzled at her father’s rapid journeys to and fro across Europe without any apparent reason, of the strange assortment of his friends and the secrecy in which he so often met them, I had long ago observed.

The truth was that I had fallen deeply in love with the sweet dainty girl whose father was the most audacious and cunning crook the modern world had produced. I believed, on account of the small confidence we had exchanged, that Lola, on her part, did not regard me with actual disfavor.

“When will your father be back, do you think?” I asked her as she lounged upon a settee with a big orange silk cushion behind her. She looked very sweet. She wore a pretty but very simple dance-frock of flame-colored ninon, in which I had seen her at the Carlton on the night when I set out to meet the man Tarrant and was so nearly caught.

I had given her a cigarette, and we were smoking together cosily – Duperré and his wife being somewhere in the great old house. I think Duperré was, after all, a sportsman, even though he was a practiced crook, for on that night he and his wife allowed me to be alone with Lola.

“Do you know a friend of your father, an old man named Tarrant?” I asked her suddenly.

“Tarrant – Morley Tarrant?” she asked. “Oh! yes. He’s such a funny old fellow. Three years ago he often used to visit us when we lived in Biarritz, but I haven’t seen him since.”

“Who is he?”

“He was the manager of the branch of the Crédit Foncier. He is French, though he bears an English name.”

“French! But he speaks English!” I remarked.

“Of course. His mother was English. He was once employed by Morgan’s in Paris, I believe, but I haven’t seen him lately. Father said one day at table that the old fellow had overstepped the mark and owing to some defalcations had gone to prison. I was sorry. What do you know of him?”

“Nothing,” I replied. “I’ve heard of him.”

She looked me very straight in the face from beneath her long dark lashes.

“Ah! you won’t tell me what you know,” she said mysteriously.

“Neither will you, Lola!” Then, after a pause, I added: “I want to know whether he is your father’s friend – or his enemy.”

“His friend, no doubt.”

“Why should your father have as friend a man who robs a bank, eh?” I asked very earnestly.

“Ah! That I don’t know!” replied the girl as she bent towards me earnestly. “I – I’m always so puzzled. Ever since my dear mother died, just after I came back from Roedene, I have wondered – and always wondered. I can discover nothing – absolutely nothing! Father is so secret, and neither Madame nor he will tell me anything. They only say that their business is no affair of mine. My father has business, no doubt, Mr. Hargreave. From his business he derives his income. But I cannot see why he should so constantly meet men and women in all sorts of social positions and give them orders, as it were. I am not blind, neither am I deaf.”

“You have listened in secret, eh?” I asked.

“I confess that I have.” Then, after a slight pause, she went on: “And I have overheard some very strange conversations. My father seems to direct the good fortunes of certain of his friends, while at the same time he plots against his enemies. But I suppose, after all, it is business.”

Business! Little did the girl dream of the real occupation

of her unscrupulous father, or the desperate characters of his friends, both male and female.

Truly, she was very sweet and charming, and I hated to think that in her innocence she existed in that fevered world of plotting and desperate crime.

We walked along the broad terrace in the twilight. Beyond spread the wide park to a dark belt of trees, Sherman's Copse, it was called, a delightfully shady place in summer where we had often strolled together.

As we chatted, I reflected. So old Morley Tarrant was a gaol-bird! Hence it was but natural that Rudolph Rayne, who preserved such a high degree of respectability, would hesitate to meet him providing he knew that the police were watching. He certainly knew that, hence the secrecy of their appointment.

As we walked Madame suddenly emerged from the French windows of the drawing-room and joined us.

"I've just had a wire from Rudolph," she said. "He's leaving Copenhagen to-night and will be back to-morrow night. I'd no idea that he had been over in Denmark. But there! he is such a bird of passage that one never knows where he may be to-morrow." And she laughed.

Later we all four sat down to dinner, a decorous meal, well-cooked and well-served. But the character of the household was shown by the fact that none of the servants – discreetly chosen, of course, and in themselves members of the criminal organization – betrayed the least surprise that I, who acted as chauffeur, should

be admitted to that curious family circle.

Rayne returned next night, tired and travel-worn, and I met him at Thirsk station.

“We go up to Edinburgh to-morrow. I shall want you to drive me,” he said as he sat at my side in the Rolls. “Lola will go also.”

His last words delighted me, and next day at noon we all three set forth on our journey north. It rained all day and the run was the reverse of pleasant, nevertheless, we arrived at the Caledonian Hotel quite safely, and were soon installed in one of the cosy private suites.

Father and daughter breakfasted in their sitting-room, while I had my meal alone in the coffee-room.

When later I went up for orders Rayne dismissed me abruptly, saying that he would not require me till after lunch.

Half an hour afterwards, while idling along Princes Street, I came across Lola, who was looking in one of the shop windows.

“Father has sent me out as he wants to talk business with Mr. Hugh Martyn, a rich American we met at the Grand, in Rome, last year. Father has come up here specially to meet him.”

What fresh crooked business could there be in progress? That Rayne had paid flying visits to Copenhagen and Edinburgh in such a short space of time was in itself highly suspicious.

After luncheon, on entering Rayne’s sitting-room, I found him busily fashioning from a sheet of thin cardboard a small square box which he was fitting over a large glass paper-weight, a cube about four inches square which was wrapped in tissue-paper, the

corner of which happened to be torn and so revealed the glass.

“I’m sending this away as a present,” he explained. “I bought it over in Princes Street this morning.” And he continued with his scissors to make the box to fit it. “I shall not want you any more to-day Hargreave,” he went on. “We’ll get back home to-morrow, starting at ten.”

And, as was his habit, he dismissed me abruptly.

Four days later I was summoned to the library, where in breeches and gaiters he was standing astride upon the hearthrug.

“Look here, Hargreave,” he said, “I want you to take the next train up to London and carry that little leather bag with you,” and he indicated a small bag standing upon the writing-table. “On arrival go at once down to Maldon and call at half-past nine o’clock to-morrow night at that house to which you took old Mr. Tarrant. You recollect it – The Limes, on the Witham road. Morley will be expecting you.”

“Very well,” I replied. “Is there any message?”

“None. Just deliver it to him. But to nobody else, remember,” he ordered.

So according to his instructions I duly arrived at the remote house at the hour arranged, and delivered the bag to the old man, who welcomed me and gave me a whisky-and-soda, which I found very acceptable after my long tramp from Maldon station. Tarrant was not alone, for I distinctly heard a man’s voice calling him just before he opened the door to me.

Recollecting that the old fellow had been in gaol, I was full of

curiosity as to what was intended. I certainly never believed it to be so highly ingenious and dastardly as it eventually proved to be.

About a month passed uneventfully, save that I spent many delightful hours in Lola's company. Her father had purchased another two-seater car – a "sports model" Vauxhall – and on several occasions I took him for runs in it about Yorkshire. Naturally he knew little about cars himself, but relied upon my knowledge and judgment. In addition to the Rolls and the Vauxhall I also had an "Indian" motor-cycle for my own personal use, and found it very useful in going on certain rapid missions to York and elsewhere. But the abandonment of the "A.C." – which had, by the way, been regarded as a mystery by the Press – hurt me considerably.

Duperré had been absent from Overstow ever since the day we had left for Edinburgh, but as the bright autumn days passed I found myself more and more in love with the dainty girl whose father was a master-criminal.

Nevertheless, I felt that Duperré's wife kept eager watch upon both of us. Perhaps she feared that I might tell Lola some of my adventures. As for Rayne, he was often out shooting over neighboring estates, for he was a good shot and highly popular in the neighborhood, while at Overstow itself there was some excellent sport to which now and then he would invite his local friends.

Rayne possessed a marvelous personality. When at home he was the typical country gentleman, a good judge of a horse and

in his “pink” a straight rider to hounds. None who met him would have ever dreamed that he was the shrewd, crafty cosmopolitan whose evil machinations and devilish ingenuity made themselves felt in all the capitals of Europe, and whose word was law to certain dangerous characters who would not hesitate to take human life if it were really necessary to evade arrest.

His outstanding cleverness, however, was that he never revealed his own identity to those who actually carried out his devilish schemes. The circle of cosmopolitan malefactors who were his cat’s-paws only knew Monsieur and Madame Duperré – under other names – but of Rudolph Rayne’s very existence they were nearly all ignorant. Money was, I learnt, freely paid for various “jobs” by agents engaged by the man I had once known as Captain Deinhard, or else by certain receivers of stolen goods in London and on the Continent, who were forewarned that jewels, bonds or stolen bank-notes would reach them in secret, and that payment must be made and no questions asked.

Late one evening Duperré returned unexpectedly in a hired car from Thirsk. We had finished dinner, and I chanced to be with Rayne in the library, yet longing to get to the old-fashioned drawing-room with its sweet odor of potpourri, where Lola was, I knew, sitting immersed in the latest novel.

“Hallo, Vincent! Why, I thought you were still in Aix-les-Bains!” cried Rayne, much surprised, and yet a trifle excited, which was quite unusual for him.

“There’s a nasty little hitch!” replied the other, still in his

heavy traveling coat. Then, turning to me, he said: "Hargreave, old chap, will you leave for a moment or two? I want to speak to Rudolph."

"Of course," I said. I was by that time used to those confidential conversations, and I walked along the corridor and joined Lola.

"I'm very troubled, Mr. Hargreave," the girl suddenly exclaimed in a low, timid voice after we had been chatting a short time. "I overheard father whispering something to Madame Duperré to-day."

"Whispering something!" I echoed. "What was that?"

"Something about Mr. Martyn, that American gentleman he met in Edinburgh," she replied. "Father was chuckling to himself, saying that he had taken good precautions to prevent him proving an alibi. Father seemed filled with the fiercest anger against him. I'm sure he's an awfully nice man, though we hardly know him. What can it mean?"

An alibi? I reflected. I replied that it was as mysterious to me as to her. Like herself I lived in a clouded atmosphere of rapidly changing circumstances, mysterious plots and unknown evil deeds – truly a world of fear and bewilderment.

Some days later I had driven up to London in the Rolls with Duperré, leaving Rayne and Lola at home, Duperré's wife being away somewhere on a visit. We took up our quarters at Rayne's chambers, and next day idled about London together. Just before we went out to dinner Martyn called, and after taking a drink

Duperré went out with him, remarking to me that he would be in soon after eleven. Hence I went to the theater, and on returning at midnight awaited him.

I sat reading by the fire and dozed till just past two o'clock, when he returned dressed in unfamiliar clothes: a rough suit of tweeds in which he presented the appearance of a respectable artisan. His left hand was bound roughly with a colored handkerchief, and he appeared very exhausted. Before speaking he poured himself out a liqueur glass of neat brandy which he swallowed at a single gulp.

"I've had a rather nasty accident, George," he said. "I've cut my hand pretty badly. Only not a soul must know about it – you understand?"

I nodded, and then at his request I assisted him to wash the wound and rebandage it.

"What's been the matter?" I asked with curiosity.

"Nothing very much," was his hard reply. "You'll probably know all about it to-morrow. The papers will be full of it. But mind and keep your mouth shut very tightly."

And with that he drew from his pockets a pair of thin surgical rubber gloves, both of which were blood-stained, and hurriedly threw them into the fire.

On the following evening about six o'clock I was alone in Rayne's chambers when the evening newspaper was, as usual, pushed through the letter-box. I rose, and taking it up glanced casually at the front page, when I was confronted by a startling

report.

It appeared that just after midnight on the previous night the watchman on duty at the Chartered Bank of Liberia, in Lombard Street, had been murderously attacked by some unknown person who apparently battered his head with an iron bar, and left him unconscious and so seriously injured that he was now in Guy's Hospital without hope of recovery. The bank robbers had apparently used a most up-to-date oxyacetylene plant for cutting steel, and from the strong-room in the basement – believed to be impregnable and which could only be opened by a time-clock, and, moreover, could be flooded at will – they had cut out the door as butter could be cut with a hot knife. From the safe they had abstracted negotiable bonds with English, French and Italian notes to the value of over eighty thousand pounds, with which the thieves had got clear away.

The bank robbery was the greatest sensation of the moment. The thieves had cleverly effected an entrance by one of them having secreted himself in a safe in the bank when it had closed. In the morning at nine o'clock when the first clerk, a lady accountant, had arrived, she could get no entrance, so she waited till one of her male colleagues arrived. Then they called a constable, and after half an hour the sensational fact of the unconscious watchman and the rifled strong-room became revealed.

The newspaper report concluded with the following sentences: "It is evident that one of the thieves cut his hand badly,

for we understand that the detectives of the City police have found blood-stained finger-prints of four distinct fingers upon the door and in other parts of the strong-room. These, of course, have already been photographed, and in due course will be investigated by that department of Scotland Yard which deals with the finger-prints of known criminals.”

With the knowledge of the injury to Duperré’s hand I felt confident that the great *coup* was due to him. And I was not mistaken.

The bank thieves had got clear away, it was true, but they had left those tell-tale finger-prints behind! As everyone knows, the ridges and whorls upon the hands of no two men are alike, therefore it seemed clear that Scotland Yard, now aroused, would very quickly – owing to its marvelous classification of the finger-prints of every criminal who has passed through the hands of the police during the past quarter of a century – fix upon the person who had laid his hands upon the steel safe door.

An hour after I had read the report in the paper, Duperré rang me up.

“I’m going to Overstow by the nine-thirty from King’s Cross to-night,” he said. “If you can join me, do. The air is better in Yorkshire than in London, don’t you think so, old chap?”

“Right-oh!” I replied. “I’ll travel up with you.”

We met, and early next morning we were back at Overstow. Yet I managed to suppress any untoward curiosity.

It was only when about a week later I read in the paper of the

result of the discovery of Scotland Yard finger-print department and of a consequent arrest that I sat aghast.

A notorious jewel-thief named Hersleton, alias Hugh Martyn, an American, had been arrested at a hotel at Brighton, and had been charged at Bow Street with the murderous attack upon the night watchman at the Chartered Bank of Liberia, his finger-prints, taken some years before, coinciding exactly with those left at the bank. He had violently protested his innocence, but had been committed for trial.

At the Old Bailey six weeks later, the night watchman having fortunately recovered from his injuries, Hugh Martyn was brought before Mr. Justice Harland, and though very ably defended by his counsel, he was quite unable to account for his movements on the night in question.

“I was never there!” the prisoner shrieked across the court to the judge as I sat in the public gallery watching the scene. “I know nothing of the affair – nothing whatever. I am innocent.”

“It is undeniable that the prisoner’s finger-prints were left there,” remarked the eminent counsel for the Treasury, rising very calmly. “We have them here before us – enlarged photographs which the jury have just seen. Gentlemen of the jury, I put it to you that the prisoner is the man who assisted in this dastardly crime!”

The jury, after a short retirement, found Hugh Martyn guilty, and the judge, after hearing his previous convictions, sentenced him to fifteen years’ penal servitude.

But Mr. Justice Harland has never known, until perhaps he may read these lines, that by the ingenious machinations of the super-criminal Rudolph Rayne, Hugh Martyn, who was one of his associates who had quarrelled with him over his share of a bank robbery in Madrid, and had tried to betray me to Benton on Clifton Bridge, had been the victim of a most dastardly treachery, though he was quite unaware of it and believed Rayne to be his friend.

Only many months later I learned, by piecing together certain facts, that old Morley Tarrant was an expert photographer and maker of printer's "blocks." Slowly it became plain that Rayne, having been betrayed by the astute American crook, had met him in Edinburgh and with devilish malice aforethought, had contrived to get him to handle the glass cube which served as a paper-weight, and which I had quite innocently conveyed to the old hunchback, who had succeeded in taking the finger-prints and by photography transferring them upon the surgical rubber glove, thin as paper – really a false skin – which Duperré had worn over his hands when he and his associates made an attack upon the bank.

By that means Martyn's finger-prints were left upon the safe door.

Duperré had previously taken out Martyn, whom one of his friends, a woman, had drugged, so that he lay in that furnished house near Maldon for two days unconscious. Hence he was unable to give any accurate account of his movements on the

night in question, or prove an alibi, and was, in consequence, convicted.

Rayne, the man with the abnormal criminal brain, had, by that ingenious *coup*, not only contrived to spirit away to the Continent a sum of eighty thousand pounds in negotiable securities, but had also sent to a long term of penal servitude the man who had attempted to betray him.

CHAPTER V

CONCERNS MR. BLUMENFELD

The pleasant high road between Leamington and Coventry runs straight over the hills to Kenilworth, but a few miles farther on there are cross-roads, the right leading into Stoneleigh and the left to Kirby Corner and over Westwood Heath into a crooked maze of by-roads by which one can reach Berkswell or Barston.

It was over that left-hand road that I was driving Rayne and Lola in the Rolls in the grey twilight of a wintry evening. We had driven from London, and both Rayne and the girl I so admired were cramped and tired.

“Look!” shouted Lola suddenly as we took a turn in the road. “There’s the lodge! On the left there. That’s Bradbourne Hall!”

“Yes, that’s it, Hargreave!” said Rudolph, and a few moments later I turned the car through the high wrought-iron gates which stood open for us, and we sped up the long avenue of leafless trees which led to the fine country mansion at which we were to be guests.

Bradbourne Hall was a great old-world Georgian house, half covered with ivy, and the appearance of the grave, white-haired butler who opened the door showed it to be the residence of a man of wealth and discernment.

That Edward Blumenfeld, its owner, was fabulously wealthy

everyone in the City of London knew, for his name was one to conjure with in high finance, and though the dingy offices of Blumenfeld and Hannan in Old Broad Street were the reverse of imposing, yet the financial influence of the great house often made itself felt upon the Bourses of Paris, Brussels and Rome.

I met the millionaire at dinner two hours later, a tall, loose-built, sallow-faced man of rather brusque manners and decidedly cosmopolitan, both in gesture and in speech. With him was his wife, a pleasant woman of about fifty-five who seemed extremely affable to Lola. Mr. Blumenfeld's sister, a Mrs. Perceval, was also present.

It appeared that a year before Rayne had met old Mr. Blumenfeld and his wife in an hotel at Varenna, on the Lake of Como, and a casual acquaintance had ripened into friendship and culminated in the invitation to spend a few days at Bradbourne. Hence our journey.

As we sat gossiping over our port after the ladies had left the table, I began to wonder why the grey-eyed master-crook, whom not a soul suspected, was so eager to ingratiate himself with Edward Blumenfeld. The motive was, however, not far to seek. Most men who are personal friends of millionaires manage to extract some little point of knowledge which, if used in the right way and with discretion, will often result in considerable financial gain. Indeed, I have often thought that around a millionaire there is spread a halo of prosperity which invests all those who enter it and brings to them good fortune.

It was evident that the great financier regarded Rudolph Rayne as his friend, for he promised to pay us a visit at Overstow in return.

“Remember what Mr. Blumenfeld has promised us, George!” said Rayne as he turned to me merrily. “Make a note of it!” And the breezy, easy-going man who at the moment was directing all sorts of crooked business in many cities on the Continent sipped his glass of port with the air of a connoisseur, as indeed he was.

That night, after I had gone to my room, Rayne suddenly entered and began to speak to me in a loud tone concerning some letters he wished to write early in the morning. Then, lowering his voice suddenly to a whisper, he added: “I want you to be very nice to Mrs. Blumenfeld, Hargreave. Unfortunately Lola seems to have taken a violent dislike to her. Why, I don’t know. So do your best to remedy what may result in a *contretemps*.”

Then again he spoke in his usual voice, and wishing me good night left the room.

After he had gone I, full of wonder and apprehension, paced up and down the fine old paneled chamber – for I had been placed in a wing in the older part of the house which was evidently Jacobean. As an unwilling assistant of that super-crook whose agents were at work in the various cities of Europe carrying out the amazingly ingenious plans which, with Vincent Duperré, he so carefully formulated in that great old-world library of his at Overstow, I was constantly in peril, for I felt by some inexplicable intuition that the police must, one day or other, obtain sufficient

evidence to arrest all of us, Lola included.

I recollect that Superintendent Arthur Benton of Scotland Yard was ever active in his inquiries concerning the great gang which Rayne controlled.

Had it not been that I was now passionately in love with Lola – though I dared not declare it openly – I should have left my queer appointment long ago. As a matter of fact, I remained because I believed, vainly perhaps, that I might one day be able to shield Lola from becoming their accomplice – and thus culpable.

According to Rayne's instructions I next day made myself as affable as possible to Mrs. Blumenfeld, but later in the afternoon I had an opportunity of chatting with Lola alone. She wanted to go to a shop in Warwick, and asked me to take her there in the car, which I did. The driver's seat was inside the car, hence, when alone, she always sat beside me.

"What do you think of Mrs. Blumenfeld?" I asked her as we sped along through the rain.

"Oh! Well, I don't like her – that's all," was her reply, as she smiled.

"I think she's quite nice," I said. "She was most charming to me this morning."

"And she is also charming to me. But she seems so horribly inquisitive, and asks me so many questions about my father – questions I can't answer."

"Why not?" I asked, turning to her and for a second taking my eyes off the road.

“Well – you know, Mr. Hargreave – you surely know,” the girl hesitated. “Why are we on this visit? My father has some sinister plans – without a doubt.”

“How sinister plans?” I asked, in pretence of ignorance.

“You well know,” she answered. “I am not blind, even if Duperré and his wife think I am. They forget that there is such a thing as illustrated papers.”

“I don’t follow,” I said.

“Well, in the *Daily Graphic* three days ago I saw the portrait of a man named Lawrence, well-known as a jewel thief, who was sentenced to ten years’ penal servitude at the Old Bailey. I recognized him as Mr. Moody, one of my father’s friends who often came to see us at Overstow – a man you also know. Why has my father thieves for his friends, unless he is in some way connected with them?”

“Moody sentenced!” I gasped. “Why, he was one of Duperré’s most intimate friends. I’ve met them together often,” I remarked, and then the conversation dropped, and we sat silent for a full quarter of an hour.

“I’m longing to get back to Overstow, Mr. Hargreave,” the girl went on presently. “I feel that ere long Mrs. Blumenfeld, who is a very clever and astute woman, will discover something about us, and then – ”

“And if she does, it will upset your father’s plans – whatever they are!”

“But Mr. Blumenfeld, as a great financier, has agents in all the

capitals, and they might inquire and discover more about us than would be pleasant," she said apprehensively. "I wonder why we are visiting these people?" she added.

I did not reply. I was constantly puzzled and bewildered by the actions and movements of Rayne and his questionable friends.

That evening after dinner, while old Blumenfeld played billiards with his guest, I marked. They played three closely contested games, for both were good players; until at eleven o'clock we all three went to the great drawing-room to bid the ladies good night. With our host I returned to the billiard-room, leaving Rayne to follow. Mr. Blumenfeld poured me out a whisky-and-soda and took a glass of port himself. Then a few minutes later he suggested, that as Rayne had not returned, he and I should have a final game before retiring.

He had made about twenty-five when of a sudden he leaned heavily against the table, his face blanched, and placing his hand to his heart, exclaimed:

"Oh! I have such a pain here! I – I –"

And before I could run round to his assistance he had collapsed heavily upon the floor.

In an instant I was at his side, but saw that he was already unconscious.

I flew to the door and down the corridor, when luckily I encountered Rayne, who was at that moment returning to us.

In breathless haste I told him what had occurred.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "Don't alarm the ladies. Find the

butler and get him to telephone for the doctor in secret. I'll run in and look after him in the meantime," he said, and hurried to the billiard-room.

I was not long in finding the butler, and quickly we went to the library and spoke to the doctor, who lived about five miles away. He was already in bed, but would, he said, motor over immediately.

On our return to the billiard-room we found, to our relief, that Mr. Blumenfeld had recovered consciousness. He was still lying upon the floor, Rayne having forced some brandy between his lips.

"He's getting right again!" Rayne exclaimed to the white-haired old servant, and together we lifted our host on to the sofa.

He recovered quite rapidly, and presently he whispered weakly:

"I suppose it's my heart! A doctor in Rome three years ago said it was rather weak."

"I'm glad you're better, my dear fellow," said Rayne. "I was much worried about you. You were playing with Hargreave, and he alarmed me."

"I'm cold," our host said. "Will you shut that window?"

For the first time I noticed the window, which had certainly been closed when we were playing, was open about a foot. Besides, Mr. Blumenfeld's glass of port, of which he had drunk only half, was now empty, two facts which, however, at the time conveyed nothing to me.

In due course the doctor, an elderly country practitioner, arrived in hot haste, and grave concern, but as soon as he saw his patient he realized that it had been only a fainting fit and was nothing serious. Indeed, within an hour Blumenfeld was laughing with us as though nothing had occurred.

But what had really occurred, I wondered? That window had been opened, apparently to admit fresh air to revive an unconscious man. But surely our host had not drained his port glass after his sudden seizure!

The incident was, at Blumenfeld's request, hidden from the ladies, and next day he was quite his old self again.

About noon I strolled with Rayne out along the wide terrace which ran in front of the house overlooking the great park, whereupon he said:

"We'll leave here to-morrow, Hargreave. Duperré is at Overstow. Write to him this afternoon and tell him to send me a wire recalling me immediately upon urgent business."

"We've finished here, eh?" I asked meaningly.

"Yes," he grinned, "and the sooner we're out of this place the better."

So I sent Vincent a note, telling him to wire Rayne at once on receipt of it.

The urgent message recalling Rudolph Rayne to Yorkshire arrived about half-past ten next morning, just as we were going out shooting. Blumenfeld was much disappointed, but his guest pleaded that he had some very important business to transact

with his agent who was over from New York and desired to meet him at once. Therefore to Lola's complete satisfaction the trunks were packed and put into the car, and immediately after luncheon we set forth to Overstow.

On our way back I racked my brain to discern the nature of the latest plot, but could see nothing tangible. Mr. Blumenfeld had been taken suddenly ill while playing billiards with me, and Rayne, when summoned, had done his best to resuscitate him. Yet Rayne's manner was triumphant and he was in most excellent spirits.

We arrived back at Overstow Hall just before midnight, and he and Duperré held a long conversation before retiring. Of its nature I could gather nothing. As for Lola, she retired at once very cramped and tired.

The whole of the following morning Duperré and Rayne were closeted together, while afterwards I drove Duperré into York, where from the telegraph office in the railway station he sent several cryptic messages abroad, of course posing to the telegraph clerk as a passing railway passenger. Rayne never sent important telegrams from the village post-office at Overstow, or even from Thirsk. They were all dispatched from places where, even if inquiry were made, the sender could not be traced.

"What's in the wind?" I asked Duperré as he sat by my side on our drive back to Overstow.

"Something, my dear George," he answered, smiling mysteriously. "At present I can't tell you. In due course you'll

know – something big. Whenever Rudolph superintends in person it is always big. He never touches minor matters. He devises and arranges them as a general plans a battle, but he never superintends himself – only in the real big things. Even then he never acts himself.”

With that I was compelled to be satisfied. That night we all had quite a pleasant evening over bridge in the drawing-room, until just about ten o'clock Rayne was called to the telephone. When he rejoined us I noticed that his countenance was a trifle pale. He looked worried and ill at ease. He sat down beside Madame Duperré, and after pensively lighting one of his expensive cigars, he bent and whispered something to her.

By what he said the woman became greatly agitated, and a few moments later rose and left the room.

The household at Overstow was certainly a strange and incongruous one, consisting as it did of persons who seemed all in league with each other, the master-criminal whose shrewd, steel-grey eyes were so uncanny, and his accomplices and underlings who all profited and grew fat upon the great *coups* planned by Rayne's amazing mind. The squire of Overstow mesmerized his fellows and fascinated his victims of both sexes. His personality was clear-cut and outstanding. Men and women who met him for the first time felt that in conversation he held them by some curious, indescribable influence – held them as long as he cared, until by his will they were released from a strange thralldom that was both weird and astounding.

Whatever message Rayne had received it was evidently of paramount importance, for when Madame Duperré had left the room and Lola had retired, he turned to me and with a queer look in his eyes, exclaimed:

“I expect you’ll have to be making some rather rapid journeys soon, George. Better be up early to-morrow. Good night.” And then dismissing me, he asked Duperré to go with him to the smoking-room.

“I’ve heard from Tracy,” I overheard him say as I followed them along the softly carpeted corridor. “We’re up against that infernal Benton again because of old Moody’s blunder. I never expected he’d be caught, of all men. Benton is now looking for Moody’s guiding hand.”

“Well, I hope he won’t get very far,” Duperré replied.

“We must make certain that he doesn’t, Vincent, or it will go badly – very badly – with us! That’s what I want to discuss with you.”

Of the result of the consultation I, of course, remained in ignorance, but next morning Rayne sent for me and said he had decided to meet his friend Tracy at the Unicorn Hotel at Ripon.

“I telephoned him to the Station Hotel at York during the night,” he added. “He’ll have a lady with him. I want you to drive me over to Ripon and drive the lady back here.”

So an hour later we set out across country and arrived in Ripon in time for lunch.

Gerald Tracy I had met before, a big, stout, round-faced man

of prosperous appearance, bald-headed and loud of speech. That he was a crook I had no doubt, but what his actual *métier* was I could not discover. He met us on the threshold of the old-fashioned hotel in that old-fashioned Yorkshire town, and with him was a well-dressed young woman, Italian or Spanish, I saw at a glance.

When Tracy introduced her to Rayne she was apparently much impressed, replying in very fair English. Her name, I learnt, was Signorina Lacava, and she was Italian.

We all lunched together but no business was discussed. Rayne expressed a hope that the signorina's journey from Milan had been a pleasant one.

"Quite," the handsome black-eyed girl replied. "I stayed one day in Paris."

"The signorina has made a conquest in Milan," laughed Tracy. "Farini, the commissario of police, has fallen in love with her!"

Rayne smiled, and turning to her, said:

"I congratulate you, signorina. Your friendship may one day stand you in very good stead."

That the young woman was someone of great importance in the criminal combine was apparent from the fact that she had been actually introduced to its secret head.

It struck me as curious when, after leaving Tracy and Rayne together, I was driving the signorina across the moors to Overstow, that while he hesitated to allow Tracy to go there, yet it was safe for the young Italian woman.

I knew that Benton was still making eager inquiries, and I also knew that Rayne was full of gravest apprehensions. Rudolph Rayne was playing a double game!

On arrival back home, Duperré's wife received our visitor. Lola had gone to Newcastle to visit an old schoolfellow, and Duperré was away in York so his wife informed me.

Three uneventful days passed, but neither Rayne nor Lola returned. On the third evening I was called to the telephone, and Rayne spoke to me from his rooms in London.

"I can't get back just yet, George," he said. "You'll receive a registered letter from me to-morrow. Act upon it and use your own discretion."

I promised him I would and then he rang off.

CHAPTER VI

AT THREE-EIGHTEEN A.M

The letter brought to my bedside next morning contained some curious instructions, namely, to take the car on the following Saturday to Flamborough Head, arriving at a spot he named about a quarter of a mile from the lighthouse, where I would be accosted by a Dutch sailor, who would ask me if I were Mr. Skelton. I was not to fear treachery, but to reply in the affirmative and drive him through the night to an address he gave me in Providence Court, a turning off Dean Street, Soho.

That address was sufficient for me! I had once before, at Rayne's orders, driven a stranger to Dean Street and conducted him to that house. It was no doubt a harbor of refuge for foreign criminals in London, but was kept by an apparently respectable Italian who carried on a small grocery shop in Old Compton Street.

As I was ordered, I duly arrived on that wild spot on the Yorkshire coast. It blew half a gale, the wind howling about the car as I sat with only the red rearlight on, waiting in patience.

Very soon a short, thick-set man with decidedly evil face and seafaring aspect, emerged from the shadows and asked in broken English whether I was Mr. Skelton. I replied that I was and bade him jump in, and then, switching on the big headlights, turned

the car in the direction of London.

From what I had seen of the stranger I certainly was not prepossessed. His clothes were rough and half soaked by the rain that had been falling, while it became apparent as we talked that he had landed surreptitiously from a Dutch fishing-boat early that morning and had not dared to show himself. Hence he was half famished. I happened to have a vacuum flask and some sandwiches, and these I divided with him.

A long silence fell between us as with difficulty in keeping myself awake I drove over the two hundred odd miles of wet roads which separated us from London, and just before nine o'clock next morning I left the car in Wardour Street and walked with the stranger to the frowsy house in Providence Court, where to my great surprise Gerald Tracy opened the door. He laughed at my astonishment, but with a gesture indicative of silence, he merely said:

“Hallo, Hargreave! Back all right, eh?”

Then he admitted the Dutchman and closed the door.

Tracy was evidently there to hold consultation with the stranger whose entrance into England was unknown. He would certainly never risk a long stay in that house, for the stout, bald-headed man had, I knew, no wish to come face to face with Benton or any other officer of the C.I.D.

Certainly something sinister and important was intended.

On calling at Half Moon Street, after having breakfasted, I found Duperré there.

“Rayne wants you to go down to the Pavilion Hotel at Folkestone and garage the car there,” he said. “He and I are running a risk in a couple of night’s time – the risk whether Benton identifies us. We both have tickets for the annual dinner of the staff of the Criminal Investigation Department, which is to be held in the Elgin Rooms.”

“And are you actually going?” I asked, much surprised.

“Yes. And our places are close to Benton’s! He’ll never dream that the men he is hunting for everywhere are sitting exactly opposite him as guests of one of his superiors.”

Boldness was one of Rudolph Rayne’s characteristics. He was fearless in all his clever and ingenious conspiracies, though his cunning was unequalled.

As I drove down to Folkestone I ruminated, as I so often did. No doubt some devilish plot was underlying the acceptance of the high police official’s invitation to the staff dinner.

Its nature became revealed a few days later when, on opening my newspaper one morning, being still at Folkestone waiting in patience, I read a paragraph which aroused within me considerable interest.

It was to the effect that Superintendent Arthur Benton, the well-known Scotland Yard officer, had, after the annual dinner a few nights before, been suddenly taken ill on his way home to Hampstead, and was at the moment lying in a very critical condition suffering from some mysterious form of ptomaine poisoning, his life being despaired of.

I was quite unaware until long afterwards of the deeply laid attempt upon Benton's life, how the mysterious Dutchman was really a waiter much wanted by the French police for a poisoning affair in Marseilles, and that he had been able, by means best known to Rayne, to obtain temporary employment at the Elgin Rooms on the night of the banquet. It was he who had served the table at which had sat the unsuspecting detective superintendent.

The latter fortunately did not succumb, but he was incapacitated from duty for over twelve months, during which period the inquiries regarding the unknown head of the criminal band were dropped, much to the relief of Rayne and Duperré.

All this, however, was, I saw, preliminary and in preparation for some great *coup*.

I suppose I had been kicking my heels about Folkestone for perhaps ten days when, without warning, Rayne and Lola arrived with Tracy and a quantity of luggage. No doubt the mysterious Dutchman had returned to the Continent by the fishing-boat in which he had come over to act at Rayne's orders.

"We are going to the Continent by the morning service the day after to-morrow, George," Rayne told me. "Tracy leaves to-night. Lola will go with us as far as Paris, where Duperré will meet us, and we go south together."

And he produced a batch of tickets, among which I saw coupons for reserved compartments in the *wagon-lit*.

Afterwards he gave some peculiar instructions to Tracy.

"You'll recollect the map I showed you," he said. "Crèches

is two miles south of Mâcon. At about two kilomètres towards Lyons there is a short bridge over a ravine. That's the spot. The train passes there at three-eighteen in the morning."

"I follow you exactly," replied his stout, bald-headed accomplice. And I was left wondering what was intended.

That evening Tracy left us and crossed to Boulogne, while two days later we went on board the morning cross-Channel steamer, where, to my surprise, we met Mr. and Mrs. Blumenfeld.

The encounter was a most unexpected and pleasant one. The great financier and his wife were on their way to the Riviera, and we were going as far as Cannes.

"I had no idea that you were going south!" laughed Rayne happily as Lola, warmly dressed in furs, stood on deck chatting with Mrs. Blumenfeld and watching the boat casting off from the quay. "It will be most delightful to travel together," he went on. "Lola stays in Paris and we go on to the Riviera. I suppose you've got your sleeping berths from Paris to-night?"

"Yes," replied the financier, and then on comparing the numbers on the coupons the old man discovered that by a coincidence his berth adjoined the one which had been taken for myself.

We travelled merrily across to Boulogne, the weather being unusually fine, and took our *déjeuner* together in the *wagon-restaurant* on the way to Paris. With old Blumenfeld was his faithful valet who looked especially after two battered old leather kitbags, a fact which, I noticed, did not escape Rudolph's

watchful eye.

Arrived at the Gare du Nord, Lola was met by an elderly Englishwoman whom I recollected as having been a guest at Overstow, and after hurried farewells drove away in a car, while we took taxis across to the big hotel at the Gare de Lyon. There we dined, and at half-past eight joined the Marseilles express upon which was a single *wagon-lit*.

Just as I was about to enter it, Rayne took me by the arm, and walking along the platform out of hearing, whispered:

“Vincent is here. Don’t recognize him. Be alert at three o’clock. I may want you!”

“For what?”

“Wait! We’ve something big in progress, George. Don’t ask any questions,” he said in that blustering impelling manner which he assumed when he was really serious.

Several times in the corridor I met the financier and his wife with their bony-faced valet, and, of course, I made myself polite and engaging to Mrs. Blumenfeld.

While the express roared through its first stage to Moret, I chatted with Rudolph and Blumenfeld after the latter’s wife had retired, and as we sat in the dim light of the corridor of the sleeping-car smoking cigarettes, all seemed absolutely normal.

Suddenly from the end compartment of the car Duperré came forth. As a perfect stranger he apologized in French as he passed us and walked to the little compartment at the end of the car where he ordered a drink from the conductor.

Hence old Mr. Blumenfeld was in ignorance that Vincent had any knowledge of us, or that Signorina Lacava, who was another of the passengers, was our friend. Yet the thin-faced valet who had brought up my early cup of tea when we had stayed at Bradbourne continually hovered about his master.

Later, as the express was tearing on at increased speed, Mr. Blumenfeld retired to his compartment, with his wife sleeping in the adjoining one, and within half an hour Rayne beckoned me into his compartment at the farther end, where we were joined by Duperré.

“I want you to be out in the corridor at three o’clock,” Rayne said to me. “Open the window and sit by it as though you want fresh air. The conductor won’t trouble you as he’ll be put to sleep. After the train leaves Mâcon, Vincent will pass you something. You will watch for three white lights set in a row beside the railway line. Tracy will be down there in waiting. When you see the three lights throw out what Vincent gives to you. Understand?”

I now saw the plot. They had knowledge that old Blumenfeld was travelling with a quantity of negotiable securities which he intended to hand to his agent at Marseilles on his way to Cannes, and they meant to relieve him of them!

“I shall be fast asleep,” Rayne went on, and turning to Duperré, he said: “Here’s the old fellow’s master-key. It opens everything.”

“By Jove!” whispered Vincent. “That was a clever ruse of yours to contrive the old man to faint and then take an impression

of the key upon his chain.”

“It was the only way to get possession of it,” Rayne declared with an evil grin. “But both of you know how to act, so I’ll soon retire.”

And a few moments later I went out leaving both men together. The train roared into a long tunnel and then out again across many high embankments and over bridges. Rain was falling in torrents and lashed the windows as we sped due south on our way to Dijon. At last I knew the cause and motive of the old financier’s fainting fit. The reason of our visit to Bradbourne had been in order to obtain an impression of the old fellow’s little master-key which opened all his luggage, his dispatch-boxes, and even the great safes at the office in Old Broad Street.

I hated the part I was forced to play, yet there certainly was an element of danger in it, and in that I delighted. Therefore I partially undressed, turned in, and read the newspaper, anxiously waiting for the hour of three and wondering in what manner Duperré intended to rob the victim. I hoped that no violence would be used.

The minutes crept on slowly as, time after time, I glanced at my watch. In the compartment next to mine the millionaire was sleeping, all unconscious of the insidious plot. The brown-uniformed conductor was asleep – no doubt he had taken a drink with Duperré. Besides, the corridor at each end of the sleeping-saloon was closed and locked.

At last, at five minutes to three, I very cautiously opened my

door and stepped into the empty corridor. The train was again in a tunnel, the noise deafening and the atmosphere stifling. As soon as we were out in the open I noiselessly lowered the window and found that we were passing through a mountainous country, for every moment we passed over some rushing torrent or through some narrow ravine.

It was already three o'clock when my nostrils were greeted with a pungent sickly odor of attar of roses, which seemed to be wafted along the corridor. It emanated, I imagined, from one of the compartments occupied by lady travellers.

Of a sudden we ran into the big station at Mâcon, where there was a wait of about five minutes – for the wheels to be tested. Nobody left or entered. All was quite still after the roaring and rocking of the express.

As we waited the odor of roses became much more pronounced, yet I sat at my post by the open window as though wanting fresh air, for the big sleeping-car was very stuffy, the heating apparatus being on. At last we moved out again, and I breathlessly waited for Duperré to hand me something to toss out to Tracy who was ready with the three signal lights beside the line.

The train gathered speed quickly. We had travelled two hundred and seventy miles and now had only a little farther to go. With my eye upon the side of the track, I sat scarce daring to breathe.

The ravine! We were crossing it! I glanced along the corridor.

Nobody came in sight.

Next instant I saw three white lights arranged in a row. But we flashed past them!

For some reason, why, I knew not, the plot had failed!

I dared not go to the compartment of either of my companions, so after sitting up a further half-hour I crept back to my sleeping-berth feeling very drowsy, and turning in, slept heavily.

I was awakened by a loud hammering upon my door, and an excited voice outside calling:

“Mr. Hargreave! Mr. Hargreave!”

I opened it in astonishment to find the gray-headed old millionaire in his pajamas.

“I’ve been robbed!” he gasped. “I can’t wake the conductor. He’s been drugged, I believe! What number is Mr. Rayne’s compartment?”

“Number four,” I answered. “But what has been taken?” I asked.

“Bonds that I was taking to my agent in Marseilles – over sixty thousand pounds’ worth! My kitbag has been opened and the dispatch-box has been opened also while I’ve been asleep. The thief has evidently had the conductor’s key or he couldn’t have got into my compartment! The bonds must be still in the possession of one of the passengers,” he added. “Our last stop was at Mâcon and I was awake then.”

Together we woke up Rayne, who at once busied himself in

great alarm.

“Possibly the bonds have been thrown from the train to an accomplice,” he suggested, exchanging glances with me.

“No. I’m sure they are still here – in the car. When next we stop I will prevent anyone leaving, and have all the passengers searched. The one thing that puzzles me is how the thief got to work without waking me, as I always place a little electric alarm on my bag when travelling with securities – and secondly, how did he manage to open both the bag and the dispatch-box it contained?”

“Well,” said Rayne. “Don’t let us raise any alarm, but just wait till we get to Lyons. Then we’ll see that nobody alights before we call the police.” Then, turning to me, he said: “You’ll keep one door, Hargreave, and I’ll keep the other, while Mr. Blumenfeld gives information.”

Thus we waited. But I was sorely puzzled as to the whereabouts of the stolen bonds. If Duperré had taken them, how had he got rid of them? That he had done so was quite plain by Rayne’s open attitude.

Presently, in the dawn, we ran slowly into Lyons, whereupon, with Rayne, I mounted guard, allowing no one to leave. Two men wanted to descend to obtain some *café au lait*, as is customary, and were surprised when prevented.

The commissary of police, with several plain-clothes officers, were quickly upon the spot, and to them Mr. Blumenfeld related his story – declaring that while lying awake he smelt a very strong

odor of roses which caused him to become drowsy, and he slept. On awakening he saw that his dispatch-box had been rifled.

When the millionaire explained who he was and the extent of his loss, the commissary was at once upon the alert, and ordered every passenger to be closely searched. In consequence, everyone was turned out and searched, a woman searching the female passengers, Signorina Lacava waxing highly indignant. Rayne, Duperré and myself were also very closely searched, while every nook and cranny of the compartments and baggage were rummaged during the transit of the train from Lyons down to Marseilles. The missing bonds could not be discovered, nor did any suspicion attach to anyone.

I confess myself entirely puzzled as to what had actually occurred. The well-arranged plan to drop them from the train beyond Dijon had failed, I knew, because old Mr. Blumenfeld was still awake; but what alternative plan had been put into action?

It was only when we arrived in Marseilles that the bewildered conductor, a most reliable servant of the *wagon-lit* company, recovered from his lethargy and could not in the least account for his long heavy sleep. He had, it appeared, smelt the same pleasant perfume of roses as Mr. Blumenfeld. At Marseilles there was still more excitement and inquiry, but at last we moved off to Toulon and along the beautiful Côte d'Azur, with its grey-green olives and glimpses of sapphire sea.

We were passing along by the seashore, when I ventured to

slip into Duperré's compartment, old Blumenfeld and his wife being then in the luncheon-car adjoining.

I inquired in a whisper what had happened.

For answer he crossed to one of the windows and drew down the brown cloth blind used at night, when upon the inside I saw, to my astonishment, some bonds spread out and pinned to the fabric!

He touched the spring, the blind rolled up and they disappeared within.

Each of the four blinds in his compartment contained their valuable documents which, in due course, he removed and placed in his pockets before he stepped out upon the platform at Hyères. He was, of course, an entire stranger to Rudolph and me, and we continued our journey with the victimized millionaire to Cannes, where we were compelled to remain for a week lest our abrupt return should excite anybody's suspicion. Meanwhile, of course, Duperré was already back in London with the spoils.

In the whole affair Rayne, whose master-brain was responsible for the ingenious *coup*, remained with clean hands and ready at any moment to prove his own innocence.

The original plan of tossing out the sixty thousand pounds' worth of bonds to Tracy, who was waiting with his three warning lights, failed because of old Blumenfeld's sleeplessness, but it was substituted by a far more secretive yet simple plan – one never even dreamed of by the astute police attached to the Paris, Lyons and Mediterranean Railway. It being daylight at Lyons, the blinds

were up!

CHAPTER VII

LITTLE LADY LYDBROOK

From the very first I felt that, owing to my passionate love for Lola, I was treading upon very thin ice.

As the cat's-paw of her father I was being drawn into such subtle devilish schemes that I felt to draw back must only bring upon my head the vengeance, through fear, of a man who was so entirely unscrupulous and so elusive that the police could never trace him.

Why a few weeks later I had been sent to Biarritz with Vincent was an enigma I failed to solve. At any rate, at Rayne's suggestion, we had gone there and had stayed under assumed names at the Hôtel du Palais, that handsome place standing high upon the rocks with such charming views of the rocky headland of St. Martin and the dozen grey-green islets.

We both lived expensively and enjoyed ourselves at the Casino and elsewhere, but the object of our visit was quite obscure. I knew, however, that Duperré was prospecting new ground, but in what direction I failed to discover. One day we returned to London quite suddenly, but he refused to disclose anything concerning the object of our visit, which, after all, had been for me quite an enjoyable holiday.

About a week after our return Rayne called me into the

morning-room. The keen grey-eyed middle-aged man was smoking a cigar and with him was Madame, whose cleverness as a crook was only equalled by that of her husband.

“Well, Hargreave!” exclaimed Rayne. “I hope you had a nice time at Biarritz, eh? Well, I want you to go on a further little holiday down to Eastbourne. Drive the Rolls down to the Grand Hotel there and stay as a gentleman of leisure.”

“I’m always that nowadays,” I laughed.

“Stay there under the name of George Cottingham,” he went on, “and spend rather freely, so as to give yourself a good appearance. You understand?”

“No, I don’t understand,” I said. “At least, I don’t understand what game is to be played.”

“You needn’t, George,” was his short reply. “You are paid not to understand, and to keep your mouth shut. So please recollect that. Now at the hotel,” he went on, “there is staying Lady Lydbrook, wife of the great Sheffield ironmaster. I want you to scrape up acquaintance with her.”

“Why?” I asked.

“For reasons best known to myself,” he snapped. “It’s nice weather just now, and you ought to enjoy yourself at Eastbourne. It’s a smart place for an English resort, and there’s lots going on there. They will think you such a nice sociable young man. Besides, you will spend money and make pretense of being rich. And let me give you a valuable tip. On the first evening you arrive at the hotel call the valet, give him a pound note and tell him

to go out and buy a pound bottle of eau-de-Cologne to put in your bath. There's nothing that gets round an hotel so quickly as wanton extravagance like that. The guests hear of it through the servants, and everyone is impressed by your wealth."

I laughed. Only a man with such a brain as Rudolph Rayne could have thought of such a ruse to inspire confidence.

Two days later I arrived at the smart south coast hotel. Though not the season, Eastbourne was filled by quite a fashionable crowd. The Grand, situated at the far end of the town towards Beachy Head, is the resort of wealthy Londoners. I arrived alone in the showy Rolls just before luncheon, when many of the visitors were seated in the cane chairs outside or on the glass-covered veranda.

I noticed, too, that the Rolls was well scrutinized, as well as myself. Under my assumed name, I took one of the most expensive rooms, and later, in the big dining-room, the waiter pointed out to me Lady Lydbrook, a young, blue-eyed, fluffy-haired little lady who, exquisitely dressed, was seated in a corner with another young woman about her own age.

They were chatting merrily, quite unconscious of the fact that I was watching them.

Her companion was dark and exceedingly well dressed. I learnt from the waiter that Sir Owen Lydbrook was not with his wife, and that the name of her companion was Miss Elsie Wallis.

"I fancy she's on the stage, sir," the man added confidently. "Only I don't know her stage name. They've been 'ere nearly a

month. Sir Owen is in Paris, I think. They say 'e's a lot older than 'er."

I realized in the cockney waiter a man who might be useful, hence I gave him a substantial tip when I signed the bill for my meal.

Why Rayne had ordered me to contrive to make the acquaintance of the fluffy-haired little woman was a problem that was beyond me, save that I knew full well the motive was, without doubt, an evil one.

It goaded me to frenzy to think that Lola should eventually be called upon in all her innocence to become, like myself, an unwilling agent in the carrying out of Rayne's subtle and insidious plots.

I was his paid servant, hence against my will I was forced to obey. My ever-present hope was to be able one day to extricate Lola from that atmosphere of criminality and mystery in which she lived, that environment of stealthy plotting and malice aforethought.

On the evening of my arrival there happened to be a dance in the hotel, and watching, I saw Lady Lydbrook enter the ballroom. She looked very charming in a dance frock of bright orange, with a wreath of silver leaves in her hair. Her gown was certainly the most *chic* of any in the room, and she wore a beautiful rope of pearls.

Presently I summoned courage, and bowing, invited her to dance with me. She smiled with dignity and accepted. Hence we

were soon acquaintances, for she danced beautifully, and I am told that I dance fairly well. After the fox-trot we sat down and chatted. I told her that I had only arrived that day.

“I saw you,” she said. “What a topping car you have! Ours is a Rolls but an old pattern. I’m always pressing my husband to get rid of it and buy a new model. But he won’t. Business men are all the same. They tot up figures and weigh the cost of everything,” and she laughed lightly, showing a set of pearly teeth. “They weigh up everything one eats and wears. I hope you’re not a business man?”

“No. I’m not,” I replied with a smile. “If I were I might be a bit richer than I am.”

“Money! Bah!” she exclaimed as she waved the big ostrich feather that served her as fan. “It’s all very well in its way, but some men get stifled with their money-bags, just as Owen is. Their wealth is so great that its very heaviness presses out all their good qualities and only leaves avarice behind.”

“But to have great wealth at one’s command must be a source of great joy. Look how much good one could do!” I said philosophically.

“Good! Yes,” she laughed. “The rich man can be philanthropic – if he is not a business man, Mr. Cottingham. The latter – if he tries to do good to his fellow-creatures – is dubbed a fool in his business circles and invariably comes to grief. At least that is what Owen tells me. He’s double my age, and he ought to know,” added the charming little woman.

I admitted that there was much truth in what she had said. Indeed, we had already grown to be such good friends that, at her invitation, the night being clear and moonlit, we strolled out of the hotel and along the promenade, half-way to the pier, and back.

Her companion, Miss Wallis, I had seen in the ballroom dancing with an elderly man who had "the City" stamped all over him. We chatted upon many subjects as we strolled in the balmy moonlit night.

"I expect my husband back in a day or two. He has been to Warsaw upon some financial business for the Government. When we leave here we go to Trouville for a week or so, and in the autumn I believe we go to America. My husband goes over each year."

Then I learned from her that they had a town house in Curzon Street, a country place in Berkshire, and a villa at Cannes. They had, it appeared, only recently been married.

"We generally manage to get to Cannes each winter for a month or two. I love the Riviera," she said. "Do you know it?"

"Yes," I replied. "I've been there once or twice."

"The Villa Jaumont is out on the road to Nice, on the left. Perhaps if you happen to be there this winter you will call. I shall be most delighted to see you."

When presently we were back in the hotel and I had gone to my room, I realized that I had made rather good progress. I had ingratiated myself with her, and she had grown very confidential,

inasmuch as I was already able to judge that she rather despised her elderly and parsimonious husband, and that she preferred to lead her own untrammelled life.

But what was the real object of my mission?

A few days later I received a scribbled note signed "Rudolph" to say that a friend of his, an Italian named Giulio Ansaldi, was arriving at the hotel and would meet me in strictest secrecy. I was to leave my bedroom door unlocked at midnight, when he would enter unannounced. Enclosed was half one of Duperré's visiting-cards torn across in a jagged manner.

"Your visitor will present to you the missing half of the enclosed card as credential," he wrote. "If the two pieces fit, then trust him implicitly and act according to his instructions which he will convey from me."

I turned over the portion of the torn visiting-card, wondering what fresh instructions I was to receive in such strict secrecy.

I thought of Lola and wondered whether she had returned home from a visit she was paying in Devonshire, and whether, by her watchfulness, she had gained any inkling of the nature of this latest plot.

Little Lady Lydbrook had now become my constant companion. Her friend, Elsie Wallis, had apparently become on friendly terms with a tall, slim, dark-haired young man who often took her out in his car, while on several occasions Lady Lydbrook had accepted my invitation for an afternoon run and tea somewhere. The one fact that I did not like was that a quiet,

middle-aged man seemed always to be watching our movements, for whether we chatted together in the lounge, went out motoring, walking on the promenade, or dancing, he always appeared somewhere in the vicinity. But on the day I received Rayne's note he had paid his bill and left the hotel, a fact by which my mind was much relieved.

That day I motored my pretty little friend over to Brighton, where we lunched at the Métropole and arrived back for tea. Her husband, she said, had that morning telegraphed to her from Hamburg regretting that he could not rejoin her at present as he was on his way to Italy.

"I suppose all our plans are upset again!" she remarked with a pretty pout, as she sat at my side while we went carefully through the old-world town of Lewes. She had become just a little inquisitive about myself. It seemed that she enjoyed her dances with me. Indeed, she admitted it, but I could discern that she was a good deal puzzled as to my means of livelihood. I had to be very circumspect, yet for the life of me I could not imagine why I had been ordered to carry on what was, after all, a mild flirtation with a very pretty young married lady.

I could see that the other visitors at the hotel were whispering, and more especially had I incurred the displeasure of a Mrs. Glenbury, an elderly lady of distinctly out-of-date views, who with pathetic effort tried to ape youth.

Late in the evening after our return from Brighton, I took a long stroll alone along the lower promenade, close to the beach,

which at night is very ill-lit, being below the level of the well-illuminated roadway. I suppose I had walked for quite a couple of miles when, on my return, I discerned in front of me two figures, a man and a woman. A ray of light from the roadway above shone on them as they passed, and I noticed that while the woman wore an ordinary dark cloth coat, the man was in tweeds and a golf cap.

An altercation had arisen between them.

“All right,” he cried. “You won’t live here very much longer – I’ll see to that! You’ve tried to do me down, and very nearly succeeded. And now you refuse to give me even a fiver!”

Those words aroused my curiosity. I held back; for my feet fell noiselessly because of my rubber heels. I strained my ears to catch their further conversation.

“I’ve never refused you, Arthur!” replied the woman’s voice.

I held my breath. The voice was Lady Lydbrook’s. I could recognize it anywhere!

I watched. The young man’s attitude was certainly threatening.

“I don’t intend now that you’ll get off lightly. You’ll have to pay me not a fiver but fifty pounds to-night. So go back to the hotel and bring me out a cheque. I’ll wait at the Wish Tower. But mind it isn’t a dud one. If it is, then, by gad! I’ll tell them right away. And won’t the fur fly then, eh?”

He spoke in a refined voice, though his appearance was that of a loafer.

His companion was evidently in fear. She tried to argue, to

cajole, and to appear defiant, but all was useless. He only laughed triumphantly at her as they walked along the deserted promenade in the direction of the hotel.

Suddenly they halted. I held back at once. They conversed in lower tones – intense words that I could not catch. But it seemed to me that the frail little woman who was so often my companion was cowed and terrified. Why? What did she fear?

She left him, while he drew back into the shadow. I waited also in the shadow for nearly ten minutes, then I passed on, ascended some steps and reentered the hotel. In the lounge I sank into a seat in a hidden corner and lit a cigarette. Presently I heard the swish of a woman's skirt behind me, and rising, peered out. It was Lady Lydbrook on her way out. She was carrying the cheque to the mysterious stranger!

Alone in my room that night I threw myself into a chair and pondered deeply. I had learned that Lady Lydbrook was under the influence of that ill-dressed man who spoke so well, and whom I at first took to be an undergraduate or perhaps a hospital student.

It was a point to report to Rayne. Somehow I felt a rising antagonism towards the young man who had successfully extracted fifty pounds from my dainty little companion who was so passionately fond of jewels and who frequently wore some exquisite rings and pendants. What hold could the fellow have upon her?

Next morning she appeared bright and radiant at breakfast –

which, of course, she took with her rather retiring friend Elsie Wallis – and I smiled across at her. She was, after all, a bright up-to-date little married woman possessed of great wealth and influence, her whole life being devoted to self-enjoyment at the expense of her elderly and despised husband. She was a typical girl of society who had married an old man for his money and afterwards sought younger male society. We have them to-day in hundreds on every side.

After breakfast we went together along the sea-front where the band was playing. The weather was glorious and Eastbourne looked at its best.

I now regarded her as a mystery after what I had witnessed on the previous night.

“I’m horribly bored here!” she declared to me, as in her white summer gown she strolled by my side towards the town. “Owen is not coming, so I think I shall soon get away somewhere.”

“What about your friend Elsie?” I asked, wondering whether her decision had any connection with the unwelcome arrival of that mysterious young man in tweeds.

“Oh, she’s going back to London to-day – so I shall be horribly lonely,” she replied.

I recollected her nervousness and apprehension before she had paid the man who had undoubtedly blackmailed her, and became more than ever puzzled.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CAT'S TOOTH

That night I went to my room at about ten minutes before midnight, and waited for the appearance of my secret visitor.

Just as midnight struck the handle of the door slowly turned and a well-dressed, dark-mustached man of about thirty-five entered silently and bowed.

“Mr. Hargreave?” he asked with a foreign accent. “Or is it Cottingham?”

“Which you please,” I replied in a low voice, laughing.

“I have this to hand to you,” he said as he produced the portion of the visiting-card which I found fitted exactly to that which I had received from Rayne.

“Well?” I asked, inviting him to a chair and afterwards turning the key in the door. “What message have you for me?” Then I noticed for the first time that he bore in his hand a small brown leather attaché-case.

“I know you well by name, Mr. Hargreave,” he said. “You are one of us, I know. Therefore ‘The Golden Face’ sends you a message.”

“Have you seen him?” I asked.

“No,” was his reply. “Though we have been in association for several years, I always receive messages through Vincent

Duperré.”

I knew that only too well. Rudolph Rayne took the most elaborate precautions to preserve a clean pair of hands himself, no matter what dirty work he planned to be carried out by others.

“Duperré saw me in London yesterday, gave me that piece of card, and told me to come here and explain matters,” the Italian went on in a low voice. “You see this case. I am to hand it to you,” and as he took it, he touched the bottom, which I saw was hinged and fell inwards in two pieces, both of which sprang back again into their places by means of strong springs. My small collar-box stood upon the dressing-table.

“You see how it works,” he said, and placing the attaché-case over the collar-box, he snatched it up and the collar-box had disappeared inside! It was an old invention of thieves and possessed no originality. I wondered that Rayne’s friends employed such a contrivance, which, of course, was useful when it became necessary that valuable objects should disappear.

“Well, and what of it?” I asked, as, opening the case, he took out my collar-box and replaced it upon the table.

“I am told that you are on very friendly terms with Lady Lydbrook. Our friend old Hesketh has been here and watched your progress – a grey-mustached man with a slight limp. I dare say you may have noticed him.”

I recollected the silent watcher who I had feared might be a detective, and who had recently left the hotel. So Rayne had set secret watch upon my movements – a fact which irritated me.

“Yes. I know Sir Owen’s wife,” I said. “Why?”

“Possibly you don’t know that she has in a small dark-green morocco case a rope of pearls worth twenty thousand, as well as some other magnificent jewels. Haven’t you seen her wearing her pearls?”

“I have,” I said, “but I put them down as artificial ones.”

“No – every one of them is real! They were a present to her from her husband on her marriage,” said the foreigner, his dark eyes glowing as he spoke. “We want them,” he whispered eagerly. “And as you know her, you’ll have to get them.”

“I shall do no such thing!” I protested quickly. “I may be employed by Mr. Rayne, but I’m not paid to commit a theft.”

My visitor looked me very straight in the face with his searching eyes, and after a moment’s pause, asked:

“Is that really your decision? Am I to report that to Duperré – that you refuse?”

“If you want to steal the woman’s pearls why don’t you do it yourself?” I suggested.

“Because I am not her friend. You have called at her room for her, Hesketh has reported. You would not be suspected, being her friend,” he added with sly persuasiveness.

“No. Tell them I refuse!” I cried, furious that such a proposition should be put to me.

The foreigner, in whom I now recognized a polished international crook, shrugged his shoulders and elevated his eyebrows. Then he asked:

“Will you not reconsider your decision, Signor Hargreave? I fear this refusal will mean a great deal to you. When ‘The Golden Face’ becomes hostile he always manages to put those who disobey him into the hands of the police. And I have knowledge that he intends you to act in this case as he directs, or – well, I fear that some unpleasantness will arise for you!”

“What do you threaten?” I demanded angrily. “I don’t know who you are – and I don’t care! One fact is plain, that you, like myself, are an agent of the man of abnormal brain known as ‘The Golden Face,’ but I tell you I refuse to become a jewel-thief.”

“Very well, if that is your irrevocable decision I will return tomorrow and report,” he answered in very good English, though he was typically Italian. “But I warn you that mischief is meant if you do not obey. Duperré told me so. Like myself you are paid to act as directed and to keep a silent tongue. Only six months ago Jean Durand, in Paris, refused to obey a demand, and today he is in the convict prison in Toulon serving a sentence of seven years. He attempted to reveal facts concerning ‘The Golden Face,’ but the judge at the Seine Assizes ridiculed the idea of our head director living respected and unsuspected in England. You may believe yourself safe and able to adopt a defiant attitude, but I, for one, can tell you that such a policy can only bring upon you dire misfortune. Once one becomes a servant of ‘The Golden Face’ one remains so always, extremely well paid and highly prosperous providing one is alert and shrewd, but ruined and imprisoned if one either makes a slip or grows defiant. I hope

you will understand me, signor. I have been given a master-key to the hotel. It will open Lady Lydbrook's door. Here it is."

"But I really cannot accede to this!" I declared. "Though I have fallen into a clever trap and have assisted in certain schemes, yet I have never acted as the actual thief."

"The Golden Face,' whose marvelous activity and influence we must all admire, has decided that you must do so in this case," he said inexorably.

I craved time to consider the matter, and after some further conversation told him I would meet him near the bandstand on the sea-front at noon next day, for we did not want to be associated in the hotel.

That night I slept but little, for I realized that if I refused I must assuredly be cast into the melting-pot as one who might, in return, give Rayne away. I thought of Lola with whom I was so madly in love, and whom I intended to eventually rescue from the criminal atmosphere in which, though innocent, she was compelled to live.

I hated to take such a downward step, though the innocent-looking little attaché-case with the steel grips and spring bottom was there by my bedside ready for use. I was torn between the path of honesty from which, alas! I had been slowly slipping ever since I had made that accursed compact with Rudolph Rayne, and my love for Lola, who had, I knew, every confidence in me, while at the same time she was growing highly suspicious of her father.

The reader will readily realize my feelings that night. I had taken a false step, and to withdraw would mean arrest, conviction and imprisonment, notwithstanding any disclosures I might make. Rudolph Rayne remained always with clean hands, the rich country gentleman and personal friend of certain Justices of the Peace, officials, and others, with whom he played golf and invited to his shooting parties on the Yorkshire moors which he rented with money stolen in divers ways and in various cities.

So, to cut a long story short, I met the mysterious Italian crook next day – and I fell, for I took the master-key and agreed to attempt the theft of Lady Lydbrook's pearls!

I now saw through Rayne's devilish plot. I was to be used still further as his cat's-paw, and he had planned that because of my friendship with the pretty young woman, at his orders I was to steal her property.

I felt myself alone and in a cleft stick. That afternoon, as I sat at tea in the lounge with the woman whose jewels I was ordered to steal, I was torn by a thousand emotions, yet I pretended to be my usual self, and at my invitation she went out for a motor run between tea and dinner.

Though I laughed at my foolishness, I somehow suspected that she now viewed me with distinct misgiving. It now became necessary for me to prospect for the little morocco case in which I knew she kept her pearls. Therefore I at last summoned courage, and one evening, just before half-past seven, while she was dressing for dinner, I knocked and made excuse to ask her if she

would go to the theater with me.

“Do come in,” she cried, for she was already dressed in a bright sapphire-colored gown which greatly heightened her beauty. As she admitted me, I saw the little jewel-case standing upon a tiny side-table near the window. She was not wearing her beautiful rope of pearls, therefore they were, without a doubt, safe in the case.

She thanked me and accepted, so I quickly went downstairs and told the hall porter to telephone for two stalls.

That night, on arrival back at the hotel, it occurred to me that if the little jewel-case had been left where it was my chance had now arrived. I was being forced against my will to become a thief. Rayne, the man who held me in his grip, had driven me to it and had placed the means at my disposal. To refuse would mean arrest and the loss of Lola.

We sat down in the lounge and I called for drinks – she was thirsty and would like a lemon squash, she said. Before the waiter brought them, I made leisurely excuse to go to the bureau to see if there were any letters. Instead, I rushed up to my own room, obtained the “trick” attaché-case, and carrying it along to Lady Lydbrook’s room, stealthily opened the door with the master-key which Ansaldi had given me.

All was dark within. I switched on the light, when, before me, upon the little table, I saw the small green jewel-box.

In an instant I placed the attaché-case over it and next second it had disappeared.

But as I did so, I heard a movement behind me, and, on turning, to my breathless horror saw, standing before me, the pretty, fair-haired young woman whom I had robbed!

“Well, Mr. Cottingham – or whatever your name is,” she exclaimed in a hard, altered voice as, closing the door behind her, she advanced to me with a fierce light in her eyes. “And what are you doing here, pray?”

Then, glancing at the table and noticing her jewel-case missing, she added:

“I see! You have scraped acquaintance with me in order to steal my jewels. You have them in that case in your hand!”

I stammered something. What it was I have no recollection. I only know that my words infuriated her, and she dashed out into the corridor to raise the alarm, leaving me in possession of the trick bag with the jewel-case inside.

I dashed after her, seizing her roughly by the waist as she ran down the corridor.

“Listen!” I whispered fiercely into her ear. “Listen one moment. You surely won’t give me away? Listen to what I have to tell you. Do – I – implore you,” I said. “I am no thief! I will tell you everything – and ask your advice. No harm has been done. Your pearls are here.”

“Yes,” she said, turning back upon me. “But you – the man I liked and trusted – are a common thief!”

“I admit it,” I said hoarsely as I dragged her back to her room, her dress being torn in the struggle. “I have been forced against

my will into robbing you, as I will explain.”

Back in her bedroom she assumed a very serious attitude. She invited me to sit down, after I had handed back her jewel-case, and then, also seating herself in an arm-chair, she said in determination:

“Now look here, George Hargreave ... you see, I know your real name. I know your game. By a word I can have you arrested, while, on the other hand, my silence would give you your liberty.”

“You will remain silent, Lady Lydbrook – I beg of you! I know that I have committed an unpardonable crime for which there is no excuse.” I thought of that strange midnight scene I had witnessed and it was on the tip of my tongue to mention it. But would it further infuriate her? So I refrained from alluding to it.

Her attitude towards me had completely altered. She was hard-mouthed and indignant, which, after all, was but natural.

“My whole future is in your hands,” I added.

She still hesitated. A word from her and not only would I be arrested, but Rayne would probably be exposed and arrested also. She seemed, I feared, to be aware of the whole organization, hence she was one of the last persons who should have been marked down as a victim. Rayne had evidently committed a fatal error.

“Well,” she said at last, “I am open to remain silent, and the matter shall never be mentioned between us – but on one condition.”

“And what is that?” I asked anxiously.

“I am in want of someone to help me. Will you do so?”

“I will do anything to serve you if you give me my liberty,” I said, much ashamed.

“Very well, then. Listen,” she said in a hard, strained voice. “If you resolve, in return for my silence, to assist me, you will be compelled to act at my orders without seeking for any motive, but in blind obedience.”

“I quite understand,” I replied. “I agree.”

No doubt she desired me to act against her enemy – the young fellow who had extracted fifty pounds from her by threat.

“You must say nothing to a soul but meet me in secret in Paris. Stay at the Hôtel Continental where I shall stay on the night of the twenty-fourth. That is next Wednesday. At ten o’clock I shall be on the terrace of the Café Vachette in the Boulevard St. Michel. Remember the day and hour, and meet me there. Then I will tell you what service I require of you. I shall leave here to-morrow, and I suppose you will leave also.” And she opened her jewel-case to reassure herself that her pearls and other ornaments were safe.

So she forgave me, shook my hand, and I went out of the room with the cold perspiration still upon me.

I made no report of my failure to Rayne, but on the following Wednesday night, after taking a room at the Continental, in Paris, an hotel which I knew well, I crossed the Seine at about half-past nine, and at ten o’clock sauntered up the boulevard to the popular, and rather Bohemian, Café Vachette, where at a little

table in the corner, set well back from the pavement, I found her seated alone. She was wearing the same dark cloth coat in which I had seen her when she met the mysterious stranger at night at Eastbourne.

“Well? So you’ve kept the appointment, Mr. Cottingham!” she laughed cheerily as I sank into a chair beside her. “You’ll order a drink and pay for mine, eh?” she laughed.

Then when I had swallowed my liqueur, she suggested that we should stroll down the boulevard and talk.

This we did. The proposition which she made without much preliminary held me aghast.

“Though I like you very much, Mr. Cottingham,” she said as we conversed in low voices, “I cannot conceal from myself that you are a thief. Well, now to be perfectly frank, I want a thief’s help – and I know that, as we are friends, you will assist me. You know my inordinate love of jewels. Indeed, I wouldn’t have married Owen if he had not given me my pearls. And you know the other ornaments I have – which I might very well never have seen again, eh?”

“I know,” I said.

“Well, now, at the Continental there is at the present moment staying a Madame Rodanet, the widow of the millionaire chocolate manufacturer. She possesses among her jewels the famous Dent du Chat – the Cat’s Tooth Ruby. It is called so because it is a perfect stone and curiously pointed, the only one of its kind in the world. I want it, and you must get it for me – as

the price of my silence regarding the affair at Eastbourne.”

I held my breath.

Her suggestion appalled me. I was to commit a second theft as the price of the first! The pretty wife of the great Sheffield ironmaster was a thief herself at heart! Truly, the situation was a strange and bewildering one.

I protested, and pointed out the risk and difficulties, but she met all my arguments with remarkable cleverness.

“I know Madame,” she said. “I will make your path smooth for you, and I myself will spirit the jewel out of France so that no possible suspicion can attach to you,” was her reply. “Will you leave it all to me?”

We walked on down the well-lit boulevard, my brain a-whirl, until at last, pressed hard by her, I consented to act as she directed.

I found, in the course of the next three days, that Lady Lydbrook’s whole life was centered upon the possession of jewels of great value, and I was amazed to discover how very cleverly she plotted the coup which I was to carry out.

One evening, after dinner, she introduced me casually to the rich widow, an ugly overdressed old woman who was wearing as a pendant the famous Dent du Chat. It was, to say the least, a wonderful gem. But I passed as a person of no importance.

Next night with Lady Lydbrook’s help I was, however, able to get into the old woman’s bedroom and carry out my contract for the preservation of silence concerning the affair at Eastbourne.

I shall always recollect the moment when I slipped the pendant into Lady Lydbrook's soft hand as she stood in *déshabille* at the half-opened door of her bedroom and her quick whispered words:

"I shall be away by the first train. Stay here to-morrow and cross to London the next day. *Au revoir!* Let us meet again soon!" And she gripped my hand warmly in hers and closed her door noiselessly.

Ah! A week later I learned how, by Rayne's devilish cunning, I had been tricked. When I knew the truth, I bit my lips to the blood.

The widow Rodanet had, it appeared, been staying at the Palais, in Biarritz, when Duperré and I had been there. She had been marked down by Rayne as a victim, for the Dent du Chat was a stone of enormous value.

The planned robbery had, however, gone wrong and we had been compelled to return to London. Then Rayne had conceived the sinister idea of sending me to Lady Lydbrook – who was not Sir Owen's wife at all but one of his agents like myself, and whose real name was Betty Tressider – a girl-thief whose chief possession was a rope of imitation pearls.

I, alas! dropped into the trap, whereupon she, on her part, compelled me to steal old Madame Rodanet's wonderful ruby; and thus, though I confess it to my shame, I became an actual thief and one of Rudolph Rayne's active agents. What happened to me further I will now tell you.

CHAPTER IX

LOLA IS AGAIN SUSPICIOUS

The devilish cunning of Rudolph Rayne was indeed well illustrated by the clever trap which he had set for me by the instrumentality of that pretty woman-thief, Betty Tressider, who called herself Lady Lydbrook.

I now realized by Rayne's overbearing attitude that he had, by a ruse, succeeded in his object in compelling me to become an active accomplice of the gang.

When back again once more in Yorkshire, I was delighted to find that Lola had returned from her visit to Devonshire. She was just as sweet and charming as ever, but just a trifle too inquisitive regarding my visits to Eastbourne and Paris. I was much ashamed of the theft I had been forced to commit in order to preserve secrecy regarding my first downfall, hence rather awkwardly, I fear, I evaded all her questions.

Nevertheless, we were a great deal in each other's company, and had many confidential chats. I loved her, yet somehow I could not be frank and open. How could I without revealing the secret of her father?

One spring afternoon we had been playing tennis and were sitting together in the pretty arbor at the end of the well-kept lawn, both smoking cigarettes after a strenuous game, when

suddenly she turned to me, saying:

“Do you know, Mr. Hargreave, I don’t like the look of things at all! Mr. Duperré is not playing a straight game – of that I’m sure!”

“Oh – why?” I asked with affected ignorance.

“I have again overheard something. Yesterday I was just going into the morning-room, the door of which stood ajar, when I heard father warning Duperré of something – I couldn’t quite catch what it was. Only he said that he didn’t approve of such drastic measures, and that ‘the old man might lose his life.’ To that Duperré replied: ‘And if he did, nobody would be any wiser.’ What can it mean?”

“I fear I am just as ignorant as yourself,” I replied, looking the arch-crook’s pretty daughter full in the face.

“Well,” she said, “I know I can trust you, Mr. Hargreave. I have only you in whom I can confide.”

“Yes,” I assured her, bending across to her. “You can trust me implicitly. I, too, am just as puzzled as yourself.”

“I know they have some business schemes together, Madame has often told me so,” went on the girl. “But while I was away at Keswick I purposely got into conversation with an old gentleman named Lloyd at Madame’s suggestion, as she told me our acquaintanceship would be useful to some business scheme of Vincent’s. It appears that he wanted to become acquainted with Mr. Lloyd.”

“And you acted upon her suggestion?” I asked, horrified that

she was becoming the decoy of that circle of super-crooks.

“Yes, though it was against my will,” was her reply. “I contrived to allow him to have an opportunity to chat with me, and I afterwards introduced Madame as my companion.”

“And what followed?” I asked eagerly.

“Oh, he was very often with us, and took us for rides in his car all through the Lakes. The hotel was full of smart people, and I think they envied us.”

I was silent for a moment.

“Have you any idea who Mr. Lloyd may be?” I asked.

“No, except that Madame told me that he is immensely rich. A few days later father came over to Keswick and stayed a few days and met him. But the whole affair was most mysterious. I can’t make it out,” declared the girl. “Mr. Duperré never met him after all.”

“We must remain patient and watch,” I urged.

This we did, and very soon there came a strange development of that carefully planned introduction.

One day, on entering Rayne’s study, I found him in conversation with a tall, dark, fashionably dressed foreign woman – Spanish, I believed her to be. As I went in unexpectedly she seemed to have risen and assumed a fierce defiant attitude, while he, seated at his writing-table, was smoking one of his favorite expensive cigars and contemplating her with amusement.

“My dear Madame,” he said, laughing, “pray sit down and let us discuss the matter coolly. I do not wish you to act in any way

to jeopardize yourself. I have made certain plans; it is for you and your friends to carry them out. And I know how clever is your friend Louis Larroca. So there is no need for apprehension. Besides, if you trust me, as you have done hitherto, you will find the whole affair works quite easily – and without the least risk to yourselves.”

Next second he realized that I had entered, and turning to me, said quite quietly:

“I’m engaged just now, Hargreave.”

So I was forced to withdraw, full of wonder as to the nature of the latest conspiracy.

I found that a hired car from a garage at Thirsk was awaiting the lady, who, I learned from the young footman, had given her name as Madame Martoz.

A quarter of an hour later she drove away without, so far as I could discern, having seen either Duperré or his wife.

Next day Rayne, whom I drove into York in the new two-seater Vauxhall, told me as we went along that he was having a small house-party on the following Thursday.

“Just a few personal friends,” he added.

I smiled within myself, for I knew the character of the personal friends of “The Golden Face.”

Yet to my surprise, when Thursday came I found assembled half a dozen perfectly honest and respectable men and their wives, and in some cases their daughters. One was a London barrister, another a well-known member of Parliament, a third

a rich Leeds manufacturer, while the others were more or less well known, and certainly all of the highest respectability. When Rayne gave a house-party he always did the thing well, and the days passed in a round of well-ordered enjoyment, motoring, golf, tennis and visits to neighbors to the full delight of everyone. In the evening there were dancing and billiards, Duperré being the life and soul of the smart party.

On the fourth day, about twelve o'clock, Lola, who had made friends with Enid Claverton, the barrister's daughter, who was about the same age as herself, came to me in the garage, and said:

"Mr. Lloyd, whom we met at Keswick, has just arrived. He's come on a visit. Father told me nothing about it. Did he tell you?"

"Not a word," I replied, wondering why the person in question had been enticed into the spider's parlor. No doubt the highly respectable house-party had been invited to form a suitable setting for some secret villainy.

I met the new guest just before luncheon and found him a white-bearded, bald-headed, fresh-complexioned and rather dapper little man, whose merry eyes and easy-going manner marked him as a *bon vivant* and something after Rayne's own style.

He greeted me when in the big hall with its long armorial windows, its old family portraits, and the many trophies of the chase that had been secured by the noble family who were previous owners of the Hall. Rayne introduced me as his secretary.

I looked into the smartly dressed old fellow's blue eyes and wondered what foul plot against him had emanated from the abnormal brain of the arch-criminal who was his host. I smiled when I reflected on the horror of those guests did they but know who Rudolph Rayne really was. But in their ignorance they enjoyed his unbounded hospitality and voted him a real good sort – as outwardly he was.

My time was occupied mostly in driving the Rolls, but when at home I watched narrowly yet was utterly unable to discern why the friendship of Mr. Gordon Lloyd, whose profession or status I failed to discover, had been so cleverly secured and carefully cultivated until he had now become a welcome guest under Rayne's roof.

There was a sinister design somewhere, but in what direction? Rudolph Rayne never lifted a finger or smiled upon a stranger without some evil intent by which to enrich himself. Usurers in the City have always been clever people backed by capital, but this super-crook had, I learned, risen in a few years from a small bookmaker in Balham to control the biggest combine of Thieftdom ever known in the annals of our time.

One day I drove Mr. Lloyd with Lola and a Mrs. Charlesworth, one of the guests, into Ripon to see the cathedral. We had inspected the fine transepts, the choir and the famous Saxon crypt – of which there is only one other in England – and had gone to the old Unicorn to tea.

We had sat down when, chancing to glance around, I saw, to

my surprise, seated in a corner alone, the handsome Madame Martoz, who had had that confidential interview with Lola's father some days before. Our recognition was mutual, I saw, for she lowered her dark eyes and busied herself with the teapot before her. Yet I noticed that with covert glances she was still regarding us with some curiosity.

Ten minutes later a tall, swarthy-faced man with well-trimmed black mustache, a typical Spaniard, lounged in and sat at her table, while she gave him tea. Mr. Lloyd, Lola and Mrs. Charlesworth were busily chatting, but I noted that the Spanish woman whispered some words to her companion which caused him to glance in our direction. Afterwards they both rose and went out.

Later, when we had finished our tea, I went to the office in order to pay – for on such excursions I always paid on Rayne's behalf – and when doing so, I asked casually:

“Have you a Spanish gentleman staying here – a Mr. Larroca?”

“No, sir,” replied the rather stout, pleasant bookkeeper. “We have a Mr. Bellido, a Spanish gentleman. He's just gone out with Madame Calleja, who is also Spanish, though they both speak English well.”

I thanked her and rejoined my party. At least I had ascertained the names under which they were known, for Larroca was no doubt the real name of Bellido.

What mischief was intended? It was evident that we had been

purposely sent by Rayne to that hotel in Ripon in order that Madame and her accomplice should see us, so that we could be identified again. Certainly it was unnecessary for them to see Lola, Mrs. Charlesworth or myself. We had, I felt convinced, made that excursion in order that old Mr. Lloyd should be seen and known to the mysterious pair.

Two days afterwards our guests dispersed, but Mr. Lloyd, pressed by Madame Duperré, remained behind.

To me he seemed one of those wealthy, rather faddy men whom one encounters sometimes in the best hotels, men who move up and down the country aimlessly during the spring and summer and in winter go abroad for a few months; men with piles of well-battered and be-labelled baggage whose home is always in hotels and whose chief object in life is to dress in the fashion of the younger generation, to be seen everywhere, to give cosy little luncheon and dinner-parties, and be the “fairy” uncle of any pretty girl they may come across.

We have lots of such in England to-day. Ask the *chef-dé-reception* of any of our smartest hotels, and they will reel off the names of half a dozen or so elderly bachelors, widowers or wife-quarrelers with huge incomes who prefer to pass along the line of least resistance in domesticity – the private suite in an up-to-date hotel.

Mr. Gordon Lloyd was one of such, and it seemed that Rudolph Rayne, who now treated me with the greatest intimacy because he saw that he had drawn me so completely into his net,

had become his dearest friend.

On the night when the last guest had departed I sat with the pair over the port, after Lola and Madame had left the dinner-table.

“Really,” said the merry old gentleman with his glass of ’74 poised in his hand, “I don’t know whether I shall go back to Colwyn Bay again this winter – or go abroad. I’ve no ties, and I’m getting fed up. I haven’t been abroad since the war.”

“Go abroad, my dear fellow,” said Rayne. “The change would certainly do you good – go somewhere in the south. The Riviera is played out. Why not go to Sicily?”

“I’ve been there,” replied old Mr. Lloyd as he sipped his glass of fine wine.

“Then why not try Italy? Glorious bright weather all through our foggy season – Rome or Florence, for instance?”

“No, I hate Italy.”

“Spain, then? Good hotels in Madrid and Barcelona. In Madrid there is a small circle of English society, good opera, and lots of interesting places to visit by motor,” Rayne suggested, for, as a rapid traveler all over Europe, he knew every Continental city of importance.

The old man was rather struck by the latter suggestion.

“I certainly am rather tired of Bournemouth and Colwyn Bay and Hove in winter,” he admitted. “I’ve never been to Madrid.”

“Then go, my dear fellow. Go by all means. The journey is quite easy. Just the train by day to Paris, and then by sleeping-

car on the Sud Express right through to Madrid.”

“Yes. But it’s an awful trouble,” replied the rich old man.

“No trouble at all!” laughed Rayne as he pulled at his cigar. “I don’t like to see you in this rut of hotels. It’s bad for you! It only leads to drinks in the bar till late and bad headaches in the morning. You must buck up and get out of it.”

“Well, I’ll see,” replied the old fellow, and then we all three rose and rejoined the ladies.

Oh, what a farce the whole thing was! I longed – I yearned to yell my disclosures against the man who like an octopus had now placed his tentacles around me. But I saw that it was futile to kick against the pricks. I had only to wait and to watch.

For a whole week things proceeded in good, well-ordered regularity. Mr. Lloyd was our guest and everyone made themselves pleasant towards him. Lola, with whom I had frequent chats in secret, had somehow become disarmed. She no longer suspected her father of any sinister intent, the reason being that he had taken the old man as his dearest and most intimate confidant.

One night after I had beaten old Mr. Lloyd at billiards and he had gone to bed, I passed by the door of the library and saw a streak of light beneath the door.

Therefore, believing that the electric light had been inadvertently left on, I opened the door, when I had a great surprise.

Rayne was seated in an arm-chair chatting with Madame

Martoz, while on a settee near the window sat Madame Duperré.

All three started up as I entered, but a word of apology instantly rose to my lips, and Rayne said: "That's all right, Hargreave. Indeed, I wanted to talk to you. Look here," he went on, "I want you to go to Madrid after old Mr. Lloyd goes there, as no doubt he will. You'll stay at the Ritz in the Plaza de Canovas, and ask no questions. I'll send you instructions – or perhaps Duperré may be with you."

"When?" I asked in surprise, as it appeared that the rich old gentleman had, after all, arranged to go to Spain.

"In ten days or so. When I tell you. Till then, don't worry, my dear boy. When I make plans you know that you have only to act."

"To the detriment of our unsuspecting guest, eh?" I remarked in a low bitter voice.

"That is not polite, George," he said sharply. "You are our paid servant, and such a remark does not befit you."

"Whether it does or not, Mr. Rayne, I repeat it," I said defiantly. "I am not blind to your subtle machinations by which I have become your accomplice."

He laughed triumphantly in my face.

"You are paid – and well paid for it all. Why should you resent? Are you an idiot?"

"I certainly refuse to be your tool!" I cried furiously.

"You have thrown in your lot with me as one who ventures constantly in big things just as any man who operates on the Stock

Exchange. It is good sport. You, George, are a sportsman, as I am. And from one sport we both derive a good deal of fun.”

“And the victim of our fun, as you term it, is to be old Mr. Lloyd!” I remarked, looking him straight in his face.

But he only laughed, and said:

“Don’t be a fool. You are a most excellent fellow, Hargreave, except when you get these little fits of squeamishness.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to roundly refuse to have anything further to do with him and leave the house, but I knew, alas! that now I had stolen the famous ruby in Paris he would have no compunction in giving me over to the police.

And if I, in turn, gave information against him, what could I really prove? Practically nothing! Rayne was always clever enough to preserve himself from any possibility of suspicion. It was that fact which marked him as the most amazing and ingenious crook.

So I was forced to remain silent, and a few minutes later left the room.

On the following Friday Mr. Lloyd left us. Rayne bade him a regretful farewell, after making him promise to return to us for a fortnight when he got back from Spain.

“Probably my secretary, Hargreave, will have to go to Madrid upon business for me. I have some interest in a tramway company at Salamanca. So you may possibly meet.”

“I hope we do, Mr. Hargreave,” said the old gentleman, turning to me warmly. “I shall certainly take your advice and try

Madrid for a few weeks.”

“Yes, do. You’ll like it, I’m sure,” his host assured him, and then we drove away.

“When are you going to Spain?” Mr. Lloyd asked me as he sat at my side on our way to Thirsk station.

“I really don’t know,” was my evasive reply. “Mr. Rayne has not yet fixed the date.”

“Well, here’s my address,” he said, handing me a card with his name and “Reform Club” on it. “I wish you’d write me when your journey is fixed and perhaps we might travel together. I’d be most delighted to have you as my companion on the journey.”

I took the card, thanked him, and promised that I would let him know the date of my departure.

CHAPTER X

THE PAINTED ENVELOPE

On my return I told Rayne of the old man's invitation, whereat he rubbed his hands in warm approval.

"Excellent!" he cried. "You must travel with him and keep an eye upon him – just to see that nobody – well, that nobody molests the poor old fellow," he laughed grimly.

I saw his meaning, but I was in no way anxious to become the traveling companion of a man who had, without doubt, been marked down as the next victim.

A fact that aroused my curiosity was that all the time Mr. Lloyd had been with us Duperré had been absent – in Brussels, I believe. His identity was evidently being concealed with some distinctly malicious purpose.

I waited with curiosity. Next day Lola, who with her woman's intuition had scented that something sinister was intended, expressed surprise to me that Mr. Lloyd was going to Spain.

We were walking together across the park beyond the lower gardens on our way to the village.

"Mr. Lloyd told me that he was going to Spain at father's suggestion," she said. "It seems to me rather strange that I should have been the means of bringing father and him together. I can't understand the reason of it all," she added, evidently much

puzzled.

“Perhaps your father has some idea of transacting some lucrative business with him. Remember, he has a lot of financial interests in Spain.”

“Ah! yes,” replied the girl. “Of course. I never thought of that. Father has been to Madrid several times of late.”

I feared to tell her what I suspected of the secret visit of that handsome Spanish woman, or of how we had been observed at the Unicorn at Ripon.

On that same day Duperré returned. He had been abroad, for when I met him at the station I noticed that his luggage bore fresh labels of the Palace Hotel, at Brussels, and some railway destinations. At ten o'clock that night, after Lola had retired to bed, I was called to consult with Rayne and Duperré, who were smoking together in the billiard-room. Duperré had evidently related to him the result of his mysterious journeyings, and Rayne seemed in an unusually good humor.

“Sit down, George, and listen,” he said. “We have a little piece of important business to transact – something that will bring in big money. Duperré will explain.”

Vincent turned, and looking at me through the haze of his cigarette-smoke, said:

“There’s not much to explain, George. You have only to act on Rayne’s instructions. The matter does not concern you as, after all, you’re only a pawn in this merry little game which will do no harm to anyone – ”

“Only to old Lloyd,” I interrupted.

“To his pocket, perhaps,” Duperré laughed.

“Frankly, you mean to rob him, as you have so many others.”

Duperré frowned darkly, and exchanged angry glances with Rayne.

“I think that remark is entirely uncalled for,” Rayne said resentfully. “You have thrown in your lot with us, as I have told you before, and with your eyes wide open have become one of my trusted assistants. As such you will receive my instructions – and act upon them without question. That is your position. And now,” he added, turning to Duperré, “please explain.”

Duperré laid down his cigarette-end in the tray, and said:

“Well, look here, George. What you must do is this. You will write to old Lloyd at the Reform Club to-morrow and tell him that you are leaving for Madrid on Tuesday week upon important business for our friend Rayne. You will suggest that he goes to the Ritz while you go to the Hôtel de la Paix in the Puerta del Sol, as being less expensive. You, as Rayne’s secretary, cannot afford to stay at the Ritz, you understand?”

“Then there is a specific reason why we should not stay at the same hotel, eh?” I asked.

Duperré hesitated, and then nodded.

“I may come out to Spain and join you in a few days after your arrival. At present I don’t exactly know.”

So, though full of resentment, I was compelled to the inevitable. Next day I wrote to the Reform Club, and in reply

received a letter appointing to meet me at Charing Cross Station on the following Tuesday week.

Lola became even more inquisitive next day. Whether her father had inadvertently dropped a word in her presence I know not, but she had somehow become aware that I had received orders to travel with Mr. Lloyd to Spain.

What was intended? The “business” upon which I was being sent to Spain was some *coup* which Rayne’s ever-active brain had carefully conceived. He had used his daughter’s bright and winning manners in order to become friendly with the wealthy and somewhat mysterious old man whom I was to conduct to Spain.

Naturally I was evasive as usually. I loved her, it was true. She was all the world to me. And my love was, I believed, reciprocated, but how could I admit my shameful compact with her father? I was now a thief, having been drawn into that insidious plot which I described in the previous chapter of my reminiscences as a servant to the King of Crookdom.

So we walked pleasantly along to the white-headed old village clockmaker, who was grandson of a well-known man who had fashioned the little grandmother clocks which to-day are so rare – the pet timekeepers of our bewigged ancestors. The name of the old fellow’s grandfather was on the list of famous makers of clocks in the days of George the Third, which you can find in any book upon old clocks.

On our walk back to the Hall we chatted merrily.

"I rather envy you your run out to Madrid," Lola laughed. "I wish I could go to Spain."

She was wearing a canary-colored jersey, stout boots, and carried a hefty ash stick, for she was essentially an out-of-door girl, though at night she could put on a short and flimsy dance frock and look the perfection of charm.

I took no notice of her remark, but purposely turned the conversation, and as we strolled back together we discussed a dance which was to be given two nights later by her friends the Fishers at Atherton Towers, about five miles distant.

On the morning appointed I met old Mr. Lloyd, who, to my surprise, had with him his niece, Miss Sylvia Andrews, a smart and pretty dark-haired girl of about twenty-five.

"At the last moment Sylvia wanted to come with me to see Spain," the old gentleman explained as we sat in the boat-train speeding towards Dover. "I managed yesterday to get an extra sleeping-berth in the Sud Express."

"I hope you will like Madrid, Miss Andrews," I said gallantly. "You will find life there very bright and gay – quite an experience."

"I'm greatly looking forward to it," she said. "I've read all about it, and though I've been in France and in Italy quite a lot, I've never been in Spain, though I've always longed to see it."

"I propose we break our journey at San Sebastian," said Mr. Lloyd. "I want to see the place, and the Casino which is making such a bid against the counter-attraction of Monte Carlo. What

do you say?"

"I'm quite agreeable," I replied. "A couple of days' delay makes no difference to me. As long as I am in Madrid on the sixteenth it will be all right. I have to attend a directors' meeting on behalf of Mr. Rayne on that day."

"Good! uncle," cried the girl. "Then we'll break our journey at San Sebastian, eh?"

And so it was arranged.

Two days later we stepped from the dusty sleeping-car in which we had traveled from Paris, and soon found ourselves driving around a wide bay with calm sapphire sea and golden sands – the far-famed La Concha.

We remained for two days at that luxurious hotel the Continental, on the Paseo, and visited all the sights, including the Casino, where we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. Old Mr. Lloyd was an amusing companion, as I well knew, a man who seemed never tired notwithstanding his advanced age, while his niece was a particularly jolly girl who enjoyed every moment of her life.

Then we proceeded by the night express to Madrid.

Mr. Lloyd insisted that I should stay with them at the Ritz, but, compelled to obey Rayne's instructions, I was forced to excuse myself on the plea that two of Rayne's co-directors were to stay at the Hôtel de la Paix, and Rayne had wished me to stay with them for certain business reasons.

With this explanation the old gentleman was satisfied, so when at last we arrived in the Spanish capital I saw them safely to the

Ritz, then went on alone to the Puerta del Sol.

That night we dined together, and afterwards we went to the opera at the Teatro Real. Next day we met again, and on several days that followed. I took them to see the sights of the capital, the sights which everyone visits, the Armeria, the Academy, the Naval Museum, the street life of the Plaza Mayor and the Calle de Toledo, the afternoon promenades in the Retiro Park and the Paseo de Fernan Nuñez.

In all they evinced the greatest interest. To both uncle and niece it presented fresh scenes such as neither had before seen, and I realized that old Mr. Lloyd had become brighter and far more cheerful than when with us at Overstow.

I had been at the Hôtel de la Paix for about ten days, when on returning late one night from visiting with Miss Andrews the celebrated Verbena de la Paloma – the famous fair held in the Calle de la Paloma – I found, to my surprise, Duperré awaiting me.

I explained the situation, but when I mentioned the presence of old Lloyd's niece his countenance instantly fell.

“Why in the name of Fate did the old fool bring her here?” he exclaimed. “I thought he would come alone!”

“She's quite a nice girl,” I remarked. “Full of high spirits and vitality.”

But Duperré only grunted, and I saw by the expression of his face that he was far from pleased that the old man was not alone.

“I don't want to be introduced yet,” he said. “At present,

though we can meet here in the hotel, we must be strangers outside.”

“And what is the game?” I demanded boldly, for we were together in my bedroom overlooking the great square and the door was locked.

“Nothing that concerns you, Hargreave,” was his hard reply. “I know you’re foolishly squeamish about some things. Well, in this affair just act as Rudolph orders and don’t trouble about the consequences.”

I realized that some evil was intended. Yet it was prevented by the presence there of Sylvia Andrews. What could it be?

Next day I met uncle and niece as usual, and we went for a motor ride together out to Aranjuez, where we saw the Palacio Real, and then on to Toledo where we visited the wonderful cathedral and the great Elcazar. I did not get back to the hotel till past ten o’clock that night, but I found Duperré anxious and perturbed. Why, I failed to understand, except that he seemed filled with annoyance that his plans had somehow gone awry.

Two days later when I called at the Ritz with the intention of accompanying Mr. Lloyd and his niece over the mountains to Valladolid, I found them both greatly excited.

“Sylvia had a telegram an hour ago recalling her to London as her mother is ill, and I am going with her. I cannot allow her to travel alone. We leave by the express at six o’clock this evening,” Mr. Lloyd said. “I am so very sorry to depart so suddenly, Mr. Hargreave. We were both enjoying our visit so much,” he added

apologetically.

This surprised me until I returned to my hotel to luncheon, when Duperré, meeting me eagerly in the hall, asked:

“Well, is the girl going?”

“Yes,” I said. “How do you know?”

He smiled meaningly, and I felt that in all probability the telegram recalling the girl had been sent at his instigation, as indeed I afterwards knew it had been. So cleverly had matters been arranged by the crooks that Mrs. Andrews was actually very unwell.

“Yes, she’s off to-night – and the old man also,” I said, glad that he was to get out of the mysterious danger that undoubtedly threatened him.

“What!” cried my companion, staggered. “Is the old fellow actually leaving also? At what time?”

“By the six o’clock train – the express to Irun,” I replied.

He was thoughtful for a moment. Then he said abruptly in a thick voice:

“I don’t want any lunch. I want to think. Come up to my room when you’ve had your meal,” and then, turning on his heel, he ascended in the lift.

On going to his room after luncheon I found him standing by the window, with his hands in his pockets, looking blankly out upon the great square below.

Close by, upon the writing-table, was a small medicine phial and a camel-hair brush, together with several pieces of paper. It

struck me that he had painted one of the pieces with some of the colorless liquid, for, having dried, it was now crinkled in the center.

“Look here, Hargreave,” he said. “I want you to telephone to the girl Andrews and ask her to meet you this afternoon at four, say in the ladies’ café in the Café Suzio, so that you can have tea together. When you’ve done that come back here.”

I obeyed, in wonder at what was intended. Then when I returned, he said:

“Sit down and write a note to the old man, asking him to let you have his address so that you can collect any letters from the Ritz for him and forward them. He’ll think it awfully kind of you. And enclose an envelope addressed to yourself; it will save him trouble.”

This I did, taking paper and envelope from the rack in front of me. I was about to address the envelope to myself, when he said: “That’s too large, have this one! It will fit in the other envelope,” and he took from the rack one of a smaller size which I used according to his suggestion.

“Now,” he said, “you go and take the girl out and I’ll see that this letter is delivered – and that you get an answer.”

I met Sylvia, and we had quite a jolly tea together. Then, at five o’clock, I left her at the door of the Ritz, saying that I had sent a letter to her uncle asking for his address, and that knowing he would be very busy preparing to leave I would not come in.

On entering the Hôtel de la Paix the concierge handed me two

letters, one from old Mr. Lloyd in reply to my note and the other that had been left for me by Duperré.

“I have already left Madrid,” he wrote briefly. “Whatever you hear, you know nothing, remember. Wait another week and then come home.”

I was not long in hearing something, for within a quarter of an hour Sylvia rang me up asking me to come round at once to the Ritz.

In trepidation I took a taxi there and found old Mr. Lloyd in a state of unconsciousness, with a doctor at his side, Sylvia having found him lying on the floor of the sitting-room. The doctor told her that the old gentleman had apparently been seized by a stroke, but that he was very slowly recovering.

Sylvia, however, pointed out that his dispatch-box had been broken open and rifled. What had been taken she had no idea.

Inquiries made of the hotel staff proved that just after his niece had gone out a boy had arrived with a note requiring an answer, and had been shown up to Mr. Lloyd's room. The old gentleman wrote the answer, and the boy left with it. To whom the answer was addressed was not known.

The only person seen in the corridor afterwards was a guest who occupied a room close by, a Spaniard named Larroca.

I recollected the name. It was the man I had seen at the Unicorn at Ripon!

I made discreet inquiries, and discovered that Madame Martoz was living in the hotel.

The truth was plain. I longed to denounce them, but in fear I held my secret.

Old Mr. Lloyd hovered between life and death for a week, when at last he recovered, but to this day he cannot account for the mysterious seizure. I, however, know that it was due to a certain secret colorless liquid with which the gum upon the envelope I had addressed to myself had been painted over by Duperré. The old gentleman had licked it, and within five minutes he had fallen unconscious.

When he was sufficiently well to be shown his dispatch-box he grew frantic.

In it had been his cheque-book containing four signed cheques, as it was his habit to send weekly cheques to the woman who acted as housekeeper at his flat at Hove, which, by the way, he very seldom visited.

By some means Rayne had got to know of this, and by that clever ruse his accomplice got possession of the cheques, and ere the old man could wire to London to stop payment, all four had been cashed for large amounts without question.

Rayne and his friends netted nearly ten thousand pounds, but to this day old Mr. Lloyd entertains no suspicion.

CHAPTER XI

THE GENTLEMAN FROM ROME

I knew that my love for Lola was increasing, yet I did not know whether my affection was really reciprocated.

We were close friends, but that was all. I was seated with her in the pretty morning-room one day about a fortnight after my return from Madrid, when the footman entered with a card.

“Mr. Rayne is not in, sir. Will you see the gentleman?”

“*Cav. Enrico Graniani – Roma,*” was the name upon the card.

“He’s a stranger, sir. I’ve never seen him before,” the servant added.

“I wonder who he is?” asked Lola, looking over my shoulder at the card. “Father doesn’t somehow like strangers, does he?”

“No,” I said. “But I’ll see him. Show him into the library.”

When a few moments later I entered the room I found a tall, elegant, well-dressed Italian who, addressing me in very fair English, said:

“I understand, signore, that Mr. Rayne is not in. I have come from Italy to see him, and I bring an introduction from a mutual friend. You are his secretary, I believe?”

I replied in the affirmative, and took the note which he handed me.

“I will give it to Mr. Rayne when he returns to-morrow,” I

promised him. "Where shall he write to in order to make an appointment?"

"I am at the Majestic Hotel at Harrogate," he answered. "I will await a letter – I thank you very much," and he departed.

Next afternoon when I gave Rayne the letter of introduction he became at once eager and somewhat excited.

"Ring up the Majestic," he said. "See if you can get hold of the Cavaliere, and tell him I will see him at any hour he likes to-morrow."

I could see that after reading the letter brought by the Italian, he was most eager to learn something further.

After two attempts I succeeded in speaking with the Cavaliere Graniani, and fixed an appointment for him to call on the following morning at half-past eleven.

What actually occurred during the interview I do not know.

Across the table at luncheon, Rayne suddenly asked me:

"You know Italy well – don't you, Hargreave?"

"I lived in the Val d'Arno for several years before the war," I replied. "My people rented a villa there."

Then, turning to Lola, he asked:

"Would you like to go for a trip to Italy with Madame and Hargreave?"

"Oh! It would be delightful, dad!" she cried. "Can we go? When?"

"Quite soon," he replied. "I want Hargreave to go on a mission for me – and you can both go with him. It would be a change

for you all.”

“Delightful!” exclaimed the well-preserved Madame Duperré. “Won’t it be fun, Lola?”

“Ripping!” agreed the girl, turning her sparkling eyes to mine, while I myself expressed the greatest satisfaction at returning to the country I had learned to love so well.

That afternoon, as I sat with Rayne in the smoking-room, he explained to me the reason he wished me to go to Italy – to make certain secret inquiries, it seemed. But the motive he did not reveal.

At his orders I took a piece of paper upon which I made certain notes of names and places, of suspicions and facts which he wished me to ascertain and prove – curious and apparently mysterious facts.

“Lola and Madame will go with you in order to allay any suspicions,” he added. “I place this matter entirely in your hands to act as you think fit.”

A week later, with Lola and Madame, I left Charing Cross and duly arrived in the old marble-built city of Pisa, with its Leaning Tower and its magnificent cathedral, and while my companions stayed at the Hôtel Victoria I went up the picturesque Valley of the Arno on the first stage of my quest.

At last, having climbed the steep hill among the olives and vines which leads from the station of Signa – that ancient little town of the long-ago Guelfs – I came to the old Convent of San Domenico, a row of big sun-blached buildings with a church

and crumbling tower set upon the conical hill which overlooked the red roofs of Florence deep below.

The ancient bell of the monastery clanged out the hour of evening prayer, as it had done for centuries, sounding loud and far through the dry, clear evening atmosphere.

Five minutes after ringing the clanging bell at the monastery door and being inspected by a brother through the small iron grill, I found myself with Fra Pacifico in his scrupulously clean narrow cell, with its truckle bed and its praying stool set before the crucifix, but on hearing hurried footsteps in the stone corridor outside I rose, and my strange friend exclaimed in Italian:

“No, Signor Hargreave! Remain seated. I am excused from attendance in the chapel. I had to meet you.”

The narrow little cubicle was bare and whitewashed. Fra Pacifico, of the Capuchin Order, with his shaven head, his brown habit tied around the waist with a hempen rope, and his well-worn sandals, had long been my friend. Of his past I could never ascertain anything. He had called humbly upon my father when we first went to live at old-world Signa, years before, and he had asked his charity for the poor down in the Val d’Arno.

“You will always have beggars around you, signore,” I remembered he said. “We up at the monastery keep open house for the needy – soup, bread, and other things – to all who come from eight to ten o’clock in the morning. If you grant us alms we will see that those who beg of you never go empty away. Send them to us.”

My father saw instantly an easy way out of the great beggar problem, hence he promised him a fixed subscription each month, which Fra Pacifico regularly collected.

So though I had returned to live in London and afterwards played my part in the war, we had still been friends.

On my arrival at Pisa I had made an appointment to see him, and as we now sat together in his narrow cell, I questioned him whether, by mere chance, he had ever heard of a certain lady named Yolanda Romanelli. It was quite a chance shot of mine, but I knew that he came from the same district as the lady.

He was evasive. He had heard of her, he admitted, but would go no further.

His attitude concerning the lady I had mentioned filled me with curiosity.

In his coarse brown habit and hood he had always been a mystery to me. He was about forty-five years of age. He knew English, and spoke it as well as he did French, for, though a monk, he was a classical scholar and a keen student of modern science.

“Now, Fra Pacifico,” I said, as I reseated myself. “I know you are cognizant of something concerning this lady, Yolanda Romanelli. What is it? Tell me.”

Thus pressed, he rather reluctantly told me a strange story.

“Well!” I exclaimed at last when he had finished. “It is all really incredible. Are you quite certain of it?”

“Signor Hargreave, what I have told you is what I really believe

to be true. That woman is in a high position, I know. She married the Marchese, but I am convinced that she is an adventuress – and more. She is a wicked woman! God forgive me for telling you this.”

“But are you quite certain?” I repeated.

“Signore, I have told you what I know,” he answered gravely, tapping his great horn snuff-box and taking a pinch, tobacco being forbidden him by the rules of his Order. “I have told you what I know – and also what I suspect. You can make whatever use of the knowledge you like. Yolanda Romanelli is a handsome woman – as you will see for yourself if you meet her,” he added in a strange reflective voice.

“That means going down to Naples,” I remarked.

“Yes, go there. Be watchful, and you will discover something in progress which will interest you. But be careful. As an enemy she is dangerous.”

“But her husband, the Marquis? Does he know nothing?”

Fra Pacifico hitched up the rope around his waist and made an impetuous gesture.

“Poor fellow! He suspects nothing!”

“Well, Pacifico,” I said, “do be frank with me. How do you know all this?”

“No,” he replied. “There are certain things I cannot tell you – things which occurred in the past – before I took my vow and entered this place. I was once of your own world, Signor Hargreave. Now I am not. It is all of the past,” he added in a

hard, determined voice.

“You have been in London. I feel sure of it, Pacifico,” I said, for by his conversation he had often betrayed knowledge of England, and more especially of London.

“Ah! I do not deny it,” laughed the broad-faced, easy-going man, now again seated in his rush-bottomed chair. “I know your hotels in London – the Savoy, the Carlton, the Ritz, and the Berkeley. I’ve lunched and dined and supped at them all. I’ve shopped in Bond Street, and I’ve lost money at Ascot. Oh, yes!” he laughed. “I know your wonderful London! And now I have nothing in the world – not a soldo of my own. I am simply a Brother – and I am content,” he said, with a strange look of peace and resignation.

We who live outside the high monastery walls can never understand the delightful, old-world peace that reigns within – that big family of whom the father is the fat Priore, always indulgent and kind to his grown-up children, yet so very severe upon any broken rule.

Fra Pacifico had that evening told me something which had placed me very much upon the alert. I had not been mistaken when I suspected that he might know something of the woman Yolanda Romanelli – the woman whom Rayne had sent me to inquire about – and I felt that I had done well to first inquire of my old friend. He had hinted certain things concerning the Marchesa, the gay leader of society in Rome, whose name was in the *Tribuna* almost daily, and whose husband possessed a fine old

palazzo in the Corso, as well as an official residence in Naples, where, in addition to being one of the most popular men in Italy, he was Admiral of the Port.

“May I be forgiven for uttering those ill-words,” exclaimed the monk, as though speaking to himself. “We are taught to forgive our enemies. But I cannot forgive her!”

“Why?” I asked.

“She has desecrated the house of God,” he replied in a low tense voice.

Two hours later I was back with Lola and Madame Duperré at the Hôtel Victoria at Pisa.

Coming from the lips of any other than those of Fra Pacifico I should have suspected that the Marchesa Romanelli had once done him some evil turn. Yet when a man renounces the world and enters the cloisters, he puts aside all jealousies and thought of injury, and lives a life of devotion and of strictest piety. Fra Pacifico was a man I much admired, and whose word I accepted without query.

Next day Lola was inquisitive as to my visit to the monastery, but I was compelled to keep my own counsel, and that evening we all three took the night express to Rome, arriving at the Grand at nine o'clock after a dusty and sleepless journey, for the *wagons-lit* which run over the Maremma marshes roll and rock until sleep becomes quite impossible.

With the Eternal City Lola was delighted, though it was out of the season and the deserted streets were like furnaces. Still, I

was able to drive her out to see some of the antiquities which I had myself visited half a dozen times before.

My notes included the name of a man named Enrico Prati, who lived humbly in the Via d'Aranico, and one evening, two days after our arrival, I called upon him. Lola had been anxious that I should stay for a small dance in the hotel, but I had been compelled to plead business, for, as a matter of fact, I had become filled with curiosity regarding the mission of inquiry upon which I had been sent.

Prati kept a wine-shop, an obscure place which did not inspire confidence. He was a beetle-browed fellow, short, with deep-set furtive eyes, and he struck me as being a thief – or perhaps a receiver of stolen property. The atmosphere of the place seemed mysterious and forbidding.

I told him that I had come from “The Golden Face.” At mention of the name he started and instantly became obsequious. By that I knew that he had some connection with the gang.

Then I demanded of him what he knew of the mysterious Marchesa Romanelli, adding that I had come from England to obtain the information which “The Golden Face” knew he could furnish.

I saw that I was dealing with a clever thief who carried on his criminal activities under the guise of a dealer of wines.

“Yes, signore,” he said. “I know the Marchesa. She is a leader of smart society, both here and in Naples. During the war she spent a large sum of money in establishing her fine hospital out

at Porta Milvio. She was foremost in arranging charity concerts, bazaars, and other things in aid of those blinded at the war. Could such a wealthy patriotic woman, whose husband is one of Italy's most famous admirals, possibly be anything other than honest and upright?"

His reply took me aback, until his sinister face broadened into a smile. Then I said:

"I admit that. But you know more than you have told me, Signor Prati," and then added: "Because the woman has risen to such high favor and her actions have always shown her to be intensely charitable, there is no reason why she should not be wearing a mask – eh?"

He only laughed, and, shrugging his shoulders, replied:

"Go to Naples and seek for yourself. The suspicions of 'The Golden Face' are well-grounded, I assure you."

So, unconvinced, I returned to the Grand Hotel full of wonder. I was not satisfied, so I determined to take Prati's advice and see for myself what manner of woman was this Marchesa. Fortunately, although it was out of the season, she was in Naples. Having two old friends there I went south with my companions two days later, and we installed ourselves at the Palace Hotel with its wonderful views across the bay. I had little difficulty in obtaining an introduction to the woman whom I sought. It took place one evening at the house of one of my friends, who was now a Deputy.

When she heard my name, I noticed that she started slightly,

but I bowed over her hand in pretense of ignorance.

She expressed gratification at meeting me, and soon we were chatting pleasantly. She was a handsome woman of about forty-five, dark-haired and beautifully gowned. With her was her daughter Flavia, a pretty, dark-eyed girl of twenty or so, bright, vivacious, and very *chic*. The latter spoke English excellently, and told me that she had been at school for years at Cheltenham.

CHAPTER XII

THE SILVER SPIDER

That night, after a chat with Lola, I sat in my room at the palace and could not help recollecting how strangely the Marchesa had started when my name had been uttered.

Did she know of my connection with "The Golden Face"? If she did, then she might naturally suspect me and hold me at arm's length. Yet if she feared me, why should she have asked me, as well as Lola and Madame, to call at the Palazzo Romanelli?

I had thanked her, and accepted.

Therefore on Tuesday night, with Lola and Madame both smartly dressed, I went to the huge, old fifteenth-century palace, grim and prison-like because of its heavily barred windows of the days when every palazzo was a fortress, and within found it the acme of luxury and refinement, its great salons filled with priceless pictures and ancient statuary, and magnificent furniture of the Renaissance.

About thirty people were present, most of them the élite of Naples society, all the ladies being exquisitely dressed. My hostess expressed delight as I bowed and raised her hand to my lips, in Italian fashion, and then I introduced my two companions. A few moments after I found myself chatting with the pretty Flavia, who, to my annoyance, seemed to be very inquisitive

concerning my movements.

As I stood gossiping with her, my eyes fell upon a little Florentine table of polished black marble inlaid with colored stones forming a basket of fruit, a marvel of Renaissance art, and upon it there stood a silver model of a gigantic tarantula, or spider, the body being about seven inches long by five broad, with eight long curved legs, most perfectly copied from nature.

Flavia noticed that I had seen it.

“That’s our Silver Spider!” she laughed. “It’s the ancient mascot of the Romanelli.”

I walked over and examined it, but without, of course, taking it in my hand. Then I remarked upon its beautiful workmanship, and we turned away.

It was a gay informal assembly. Among the men there were several naval and military attachés from the Embassies, as well as one or two Deputies with their wives. Once or twice I had brief chats with the Marchesa, who, of course, was the center of her guests. One man, tall, with deep-set eyes and a well-trimmed black beard, seemed to pay her particular attention, and on discreet inquiry as to who he was, I discovered him to be the well-known banker, Pietro Zuccari, who represented Orvieto in the Chamber.

Now the reason of our visit to the Marchesa’s was to see what manner of company she kept, but I detected nothing suspicious in any person in that chattering assembly. Yet I could not put away from myself what Fra Pacifico had told me in the silence

of the cloisters of San Domenico.

Again I looked upon the handsome face of that gay society woman and wondered what secret could be hidden behind that happy, laughing countenance.

After leaving the Palazzo Romanelli that night I resolved to “fade out” and watch.

Now Admiral the Marquis Romanelli, who was in charge of the important port of Naples, had, during the late war, returned to his position as a high naval officer, and with all his patriotism as the head of a noble Roman house, had done his level best against the enemy until the proclamation of peace.

Wherever one went one heard loud praises of “Torquato,” as he was affectionately called by his Christian name by the populace.

After due consideration I decided that we should move from Naples to the pretty little town of Salerno at the other end of the blue bay, and there at the Hôtel d’Angleterre, facing the sapphire sea, I spent several delightful days with the girl I so passionately loved.

“I cannot see the reason for all this inquiry, Mr. Hargreave,” she said one evening, as we were walking by the moonlit sea after we had dined and Madame had retired. “Why should father wish you to watch the Marchesa so narrowly? How can she concern him? They are strangers.”

I was silent for a few seconds.

“Your father’s business is a confidential one, no doubt. He has

his own views, and I am, after all, his secretary and servant.”

“I – I often wish you were not,” the girl blurted forth.

“Why?” I asked in surprise.

“Oh! I don’t really know. Sometimes I feel so horribly apprehensive. Madame is always so discreet and so mysterious. She will never tell me anything; and you – you, Mr. Hargreave, you are the same,” she declared petulantly.

“I cannot, I regret, disclose to you facts of which I am ignorant,” I protested. “I am just as much in the dark concerning the actual object of our mission here as you are.”

“Do you think Madame knows anything of your mission here?” asked the girl.

“I don’t expect so. Your father is a very close and secretive man concerning his own business.”

“Ah! a mysterious business!” she exclaimed in a strange meaning voice. “Sometimes, Mr. Hargreave – sometimes I feel that it is not altogether an honest business.”

“Many brilliant pieces of business savor of dishonesty,” I remarked. “The successful business man cannot always, in these days of double-dealing chicanery and cut prices, act squarely, otherwise he is quickly left behind by his more shrewd competitors.”

And then I thought it wise to turn the subject of our conversation.

Salerno is only thirty miles from Naples, therefore I often traveled to the latter place – indeed, almost daily.

In Italian they have an old saying, “*A chi veglia tutto si rivela*” (“To him who remains watchful everything becomes revealed”). That had long been my motto. With Lola and Madame Duperré I was in Italy in order to learn what I could concerning the woman whom Fra Pacifico had so bitterly denounced.

One warm afternoon when, without being seen, I was watching the Marchesa’s pretty daughter Flavia who had strolled into the town, I saw her meet, close to the Café Ferrari, that tall, black-bearded, middle-aged banker Pietro Zuccari, whom I had seen at their palazzo. They walked as far as the Piazza San Ferdinando and entered the Gambrinus, where they sat at a little table eating ices, while he talked to her very confidentially. As I idled outside in a shabby suit and battered straw hat which I had bought, I saw this great Italian banker gesticulating and whispering into her ear.

The girl’s attitude was that of a person absorbing all his arguments in order to repeat them, for she nodded slowly from time to time, though she uttered but few words; indeed, only now and then did she ask any question.

I could, of course, hear nothing. But what I was able to observe aroused my curiosity, for the meeting between the girl and the middle-aged banker was palpably a clandestine one.

On emerging, they parted, he walking in the direction of the railway station, while the girl strolled homeward. Was she carrying a message to her mother from the famous financier?

The excitement he had betrayed interested me. I noticed that he had once clenched his fist and brought it down heavily before her as they sat together.

For a whole month we remained at Salerno, and a delightful month it proved, for I had long chats and walks with Lola, and we became even greater and more intimate friends. Madame Duperré noticed it but said nothing.

I went each day to slouch and idle in Naples, to sit before cafés and eat my frugal meal at one or other of the osterie which abound in the city, or to take my *apéritif* at the *liquoristi*, Canevera's, Attila's, or the others'.

I confess that I was mystified why I should have been sent to watch that woman.

So clever, so well-thought-out and so insidious were all Rayne's methods to obtain information of the intentions and movements of certain people of wealth, that I knew from experience that there was some cleverly concealed scheme afoot which could only be carried out after certain accurate details had been obtained.

I was torn between two intentions, either to reappear suddenly as a passing traveler and call at the Palazzo Romanelli, or still to lie low.

Many times I discussed it with Lola and Madame.

"Zuccari is always with the Marchesa," I said one morning as we sat together at *déjeuner* at Salerno. "I can't quite make things out. I have been watching intently, yet I can discover nothing. He

sent a message to her by Flavia the other day – an urgent and defiant message, I believe. I hear also that the Admiral goes to Rome to-night,” I added. “He has been suddenly called to the Ministry of Marine.”

“Then you will follow, of course? We will remain here to keep an eye upon the Marchesa,” said Madame.

“You do not suspect the Admiral?” I asked.

“Not at all,” she said. “It is the woman we have to watch.”

“And also the pretty daughter?” I suggested.

With that she agreed. We were, however, faced by a strangely complex problem. Here was a woman – one of the most popular in all Italy – denounced by the humble monk of San Domenico as a dangerous adventuress. And yet she was the strongest supporter of the popular Pietro Zuccari – the wealthy man by whose efforts the finances of Italy had been reëstablished after the war.

After a long conference it was arranged that Madame and Lola should go to Rome and there watch the Admiral’s movements, while I remained in Naples ever on the alert.

Sometimes I became obsessed by the feeling that I was off the track. Once or twice I had received “*ferma in posta*” – confidential letters from Rudolph Rayne and also from Duperré. To these I replied to an unsuspecting address – a library in Knightsbridge.

By reason, however, of keeping observation upon the Palazzo Romanelli I gained considerable knowledge concerning those who came and went. I knew, for instance, that the pretty Flavia

was in the habit of meeting in strictest secrecy a good-looking young lieutenant of artillery named Rinaldo Ricci. Indeed, they met almost daily. It struck me as more than curious that on the day after the Admiral had left hurriedly for Rome Zuccari should arrive from Bari, and having taken a room at the Excelsior Hotel, dine at the palazzo.

My vigil that night was a long one. I managed to creep up through the grounds and peer through the wooden shutters into the fine, well-furnished *salon* of the palazzo. It was unoccupied, but upon a table on the opposite side of the room stood the Silver Spider, the strange but exquisite mascot of the Romanelli. No doubt some legend was attached to it, just as there are legends to many family heirlooms.

That night I made a further discovery, namely, that when Zuccari left he returned to his hotel, where Flavia's secret lover had a long chat with him.

Next day a strange thing happened. While watching the Marchesa I saw her, about eleven o'clock in the morning, walking alone in the Corso Vittorio when she accidentally encountered the banker Zuccari. They passed each other as total strangers!

Why? There was some deep motive in that pretended ignorance of each other's identity. Could it be because they feared they were being watched? And yet was not Zuccari a frequent visitor at the Palazzo Romanelli, for it was there I had first met him? In any case, it was curious that Zuccari and young Rinaldo Ricci should be friends apparently unknown to either the

Marchesa or to Flavia.

In order to probe the mystery I decided that it would be necessary to learn more of Zuccari's movements. Therefore, having watched him call at the Palazzo Romanelli, I waited for him to leave, and at ten o'clock that same night he suddenly departed from Naples for the north. I traveled by the same train. Arrived at Rome, the banker remained at the buffet about half an hour, when he joined the express train for Milan, and all through the day and the night I traveled, wondering what might be his destination.

On arrival at Milan, I kept observation upon him. From the chief telegraph office he dispatched a telegram and then drove to the Hôtel Cavour, where he engaged a room. At once I telegraphed to Madame to bring Lola and join me at the Hôtel de Milan. They arrived next day and I told them of my movements.

Three days later Zuccari left the Cavour and traveled to the frontier, little dreaming that he was being so closely followed. Madame and Lola went by the same train, but having discovered that he had bought a ticket for Zurich, I left by the train that followed.

On arrival at Zurich, I was not long in rejoining my companions, for we had a rendezvous at the Savoy, when I learnt that Zuccari was staying at the Dolder Hotel, up on the Zurichberg above the Lake.

"A man named Hauser is calling upon him this evening," Madame told me. "We must watch."

This we did. More respectably dressed than when in Naples, I was smoking my after-dinner cigar in the handsome hall of the Dolder Hotel when a tall, well-set-up man, whose fair hair and square jaw stamped him as German-Swiss, inquired of the hall porter for Signor Zuccari, and was at once shown up to the banker's private sitting-room, where they remained together for nearly an hour.

As I sat waiting impatiently below, I wondered what was happening.

I had already reported our movements to Rayne, who had, in a telegram, expressed great surprise that the Deputy should have left Italy and gone to Zurich – of all places.

Zuccari, on descending the stairs with his friend Hauser, confronted me face to face, but it was apparent that he did not recognize me. Hence I took courage and, later on, engaging a room, moved to the same hotel. Next morning I saw the banker meet the man Hauser a second time, and together they took a long walk on the outskirts of the town above the Lake.

From the concierge I extracted certain valuable information in exchange for the hundred-franc note I slipped into his hands. It seemed that the banker Zuccari frequently visited that hotel, and on every occasion the man Hauser came to Zurich to see him.

“They are conducting some crooked business – that is my belief, m'sieur!” the uniformed man told me in confidence.

“Why do you suspect that?” I asked quickly.

“Well,” he said confidentially, “Isler, the commissary of

police, who is now at Berne, once pointed him out to me and said he was a friend, and believed to be one of the accomplices, of Ferdinando Morosini, the notorious jewel-thief who was caught in Milan six months ago and sent to fifteen years' at Gorgona."

At the mention of jewel theft I at once pricked up my ears.

"Then Hauser may be a receiver of stolen jewels, eh?" I whispered.

"I would not like to say that, m'sieur, but depend upon it he is a person to be gravely suspected. What business he has with the banker I cannot imagine."

I knew Morosini by repute. I had heard Rayne mention him, and no doubt he was a member of the gang who had blundered and fallen into the hands of the police. Was it in connection with this incident that I had been sent to Italy to make inquiries?

I told Madame when alone what I had discovered, whereat she smiled.

"I expect you have discovered the truth," she said. "We must let Rudolph know at once."

To telegraph was impossible, therefore I sat down and wrote a long letter, and then I waited inactive but anxious for a reply.

It came at last. He expressed himself fully satisfied, but urged me to continue my investigations regarding the handsome wife of the Marchese.

"Be careful how you act," he added. "If they suspected you of prying something disagreeable might happen to you."

I was not surprised at his warning, for I knew the character of

some of the international crooks who were Rayne's "friends."

But surely the banker Zuccari could not be a crook? If he were, then he was a master-criminal like Rayne himself. If so, what was the motive of his close association with the Marchesa Romanelli? I had noticed when at the palazzo that he seemed infatuated with her, yet she no doubt little dreamed of his active association with such a person as Hauser.

It seemed quite plain that whatever the truth the Admiral had no suspicion of his wife.

Zuccari and Hauser still remained in Zurich, so, though I had arranged with Madame and Lola to return with them to Naples, I sent them back alone and remained to watch.

On the night of their departure I was tired and must have slept soundly after a heavy day, when I was suddenly awakened by a strong light flashed into my face, and at the same instant I saw a hand holding a silken cord which had been slowly slipped beneath my ear as I lay upon the pillow.

For a second I held my breath, but next moment I realized that I was being attacked, and that the cord being already round my neck with a slip-knot, those sinewy hands I had seen in the flash of light intended to strangle me.

My only chance was to keep cool. So I grunted in pretense of being only half-awake, and turning very slightly to my side, my hand slowly reached against my pillow. At any second the cord might be drawn tight when all chance of giving the alarm would be swept away from me. Yet my assailant was deliberate,

apparently in order to make quite certain that the cord around my neck should effect its fatal purpose.

Of a sudden I grasped what I had against my pillow – a small rubber ball – and suddenly shooting out my hand in his direction, squeezed it.

A yell of excruciating pain rang through the hotel, and he sprang back, releasing his hold upon the cord.

Then next moment, when I switched on the light, I found the man Hauser dancing about my room, his face covered with his hands – blinded, and his countenance burnt by the dose of sulphuric acid I had, in self-defense, squirted full into it.

For defense against secret attack the rubber ball filled with acid Rayne always compelled me to carry, as being far preferable to revolver, knife or sword-cane. It is easily carried, easily concealed in the palm of the hand, makes no noise, and if used suddenly is entirely efficacious.

My assailant, blinded, shrieking with pain, and his face forever scarred, quickly disappeared to make what excuse he might. Later I found that he had previously tampered with the brass bolt of my door by removing the screws of the socket, enlarging the holes and embedding the screws in soft putty so that on turning the handle and pressing the door the socket gave way and fell noiselessly upon the carpet!

This attempt upon me at once proved that I was on the right scent, and according to Rayne's instructions I that day followed Madame and Lola back to Salerno.

On changing trains at the Central Station at Rome I bought a newspaper, and the first heading that met my eyes was one which told of a mysterious robbery of the wonderful pearls of the Princess di Acquanero.

With avidity I read that the young Princess, as noted for her beauty as for her jewels, the only daughter of the millionaire Italian shipowner Andrea Ottone, of Genoa, who had married the Prince a year ago, had been robbed of her famous string of pearls under most mysterious circumstances.

Two days before she had been staying at the great Castello di Antigniano, near Bari, where her uncle, the Baron Bertolini, had been entertaining a party of friends. On dressing for dinner she found that her jewel-case had been rifled and the pearls, worth twenty thousand pounds sterling, were missing!

“The police have a theory that the guilty person was introduced into the castello by one of the many servants,” the report went on. “The thief, whoever it was, must, however, have had great difficulty in reaching the Princess’ room, as the Baron, knowing that his lady guests bring valuable jewelry, always sets a watch upon the only staircase by which the ladies’ rooms can be approached.”

With the paper in my hand the train slowly drew out of Rome on its way south. My mind was filled with suspicion. I was wondering vaguely whether the Marchesa Romanelli had been among the guests, for I recollected those words of Fra Pacifico that “the woman had committed sacrilege in the House of God.”

Could it be possible that he knew the Marchesa to be a thief who had stolen some valuable church plate from one or other of the ancient churches in Italy? If so, then, though the wife of the Admiral, she was also a thief.

On arrival at Salerno I took Madame aside, and telling her of my adventure with the man Hauser, I showed her the newspaper and declared my suspicions.

“It may be so,” she said. “If she is so friendly with this banker whose past is quite obscure, it may be her hand which takes the stuff and passes it on to Zuccari, who in turn sells it to Hauser.”

With that theory I agreed.

On the following day I took train into Naples, and that afternoon I called upon the Marchesa.

Fortunately I found her alone, and when I was shown into her *salon* I thought she looked rather wan and pale, but she greeted me affably and expressed delight that I should call before returning to England.

As we chatted she let drop, as I expected she would, the fact that she had been staying at the Castello di Antignano.

“You’ve seen in the papers, I suppose, all about the pearls of the Princess di Acquanero?” she went on. “A most mysterious affair!”

I looked the pretty woman straight in the face, and replied:

“Not so very mysterious, Marchesa.”

“Why not?” she asked, opening her big, black eyes widely.

“Not so mysterious if I may be permitted to look inside that

ornament over there – the heirloom of the Romanelli – the Silver Spider,” I said calmly.

“What do you mean?” she cried resentfully. “I don’t understand you.”

I smiled.

“Then let me be a little more explicit,” I said. “Have you heard of a man named Hauser? Well, he made an attempt upon my life. Hence I am here this afternoon to see you. May I lift the body of the Silver Spider and look inside?”

“Certainly not!” she cried, facing me boldly.

“Then you fear me – eh?”

“I do not fear you. I don’t know you!” she cried.

I laughed, and said:

“Then if not, why may I not be permitted to look inside your husband’s family heirloom?”

She was silent for a moment. My question nonplussed her. I was, I confess, bitter because of the deliberate attempt to kill me.

“I will not allow any stranger to tamper with our Silver Spider!” she cried resentfully.

“Very well. Then I shall take my own course, and I shall inform your husband that you stole the Princess’s pearls, that your banker friend acts as intermediary in your clever thefts, and that Hauser disposes of the jewels in Amsterdam.”

“I – I – ” she gasped.

“I know everything,” I said, while she looked around bewildered. “I know that you are playing a crooked game even

with those who played straight with you before your marriage to the Marchese. He is in ignorance of your past. But I know it. Listen!" and I paused and looked straight into her eyes.

"You were a widow with a young daughter before you married the Marchese. That was nine years ago. To him you passed yourself off as the widow of an Italian advocate named Terroni, of Perugia; but you were not. You are Austrian. Your name is Frieda Hoheisel, and you were an adventuress and a thief! You married a certain man who is to-day in a monastery at Signa in the Val d'Arno, and though you pose as the loving wife of one of Italy's premier admirals, you are a noted jewel-thief, and commit these robberies in order to supply your bogus banker friend Zuccari with funds. Now," I added, "I will take the Princess's necklace from the Silver Spider and you will, in my presence, pack it up and address it to her. I will post it."

"Never! I risked too much to get it!" she cried, her face aflame.

"Very well. Then within an hour your husband and the police will know the truth. Remember, I have been suspected of making inquiries by your friends and have very nearly lost my life in consequence."

"But – oh! I can't – "

"You shall, woman!" I thundered. "You shall give back those stolen pearls!"

And crossing to the table whereon stood the Silver Spider, I opened it, and there within reposed the pearls in a place that

nobody would suspect.

I stood over her while she packed them into a common cardboard box and addressed them to the Princess in Rome. At first she demurred about her handwriting, but I insisted. I intended her to take the risk – just as I had taken a risk.

And, further, I compelled her to order her car, and we drove to the General Post Office in Naples, where I saw that she registered the valuable packet.

The anonymous return of the pearls was a nine days' wonder throughout Italy; but the Marchesa never knew how I had obtained my information, and never dreamed that I had come to her upon a mission of inquiry from the one person in all the world whom she feared, the man in whose clutches she had been for years – the mysterious "Golden Face."

When, with Lola and Madame, I returned home a week later and explained the whole of my adventures, Rayne sat for a few moments silent. Then, as I looked, I saw vengeance written upon his face.

"I suspected that she was playing me false, and selling stuff in secret through that fellow Zuccari! She is carrying on the business by herself. I now have proof of it – and I shall take my own steps! You will see!"

He did – and a month later the Marchesa Romanelli was arrested and sent to prison for the theft of a pair of diamond earrings belonging to a fellow-guest staying at one of the great palaces of Florence.

It was a scandal that Italy is not likely to easily forget.

CHAPTER XIII

ABDUL HAMID'S JEWELS

Rudolph Rayne, though the ruler of aristocratic Crookdom, was sometimes most sympathetic and generous towards lovers.

The following well illustrates his strange abnormal personality and complex nature:

One night I chanced to enter his bedroom at Half Moon Street, when I found him looking critically through a quantity of the most magnificent sparkling gems my eyes had ever seen. Some were set as pendants, brooches, and earrings, while others – great rubies and emeralds of immense value – were uncut.

As I entered he put his hands over them in distinct annoyance. Then, a few seconds later, removed them, saying with a queer laugh:

“A nice little lot this, eh? One of the very finest collections I’ve seen.”

On the table lay a pair of jewelers’ tweezers and a magnifying glass, therefore it was apparent that, as a connoisseur of gems, he had been estimating their value.

“By Jove!” I exclaimed. “They certainly are magnificent! Whose are they?”

“They once belonged to the dead Sultan Abdul Hamid of Turkey,” he replied; “but at present they belong to me!” He

laughed grimly.

Inwardly I wondered by what means the priceless gems had fallen into his hands. He read my thoughts at once, for he said:

“You are curious, of course, as to how I became possessed of them. Naturally. Well, Hargreave, it’s a very funny story and concerns a real good fellow and, incidentally, a very pretty girl. Take a cigar, sit down, and I’ll tell you frankly all about it – only, of course, not a word of the facts will ever pass your lips – not to Lola, or to anybody else. Your lips are sealed.”

“I promise,” I said, selecting one of his choice cigars and lighting it, my curiosity aroused.

“Then listen,” he said, “and I’ll tell you the whole facts, as far as I’ve been able to gather them.”

What he recounted was certainly romantic, though a little involved, for he was not a very good *raconteur*. However, in setting down this curious story – a story which shows that he was not altogether bad, and was a sportsman after all – I have rearranged his words in narrative form, so that readers of these curious adventures may fully understand.

“How horribly glum you are to-night, dear! What’s the matter? Are you sad that we should meet here – in Paris?” asked a pretty girl.

“Glum!” echoed the smooth-haired young man in the perfectly fitting dinner-jacket and black tie. “I really didn’t know that I looked glum,” and then, straightening himself, he looked across the *table à deux* in the gay Restaurant Volnay at the

handsome, dark-haired, exquisitely dressed girl who sat before him with her elbows on the table.

“Yes, you really are jolly glum, my dear Old Thing. You looked a moment ago as serious as though you were going to a funeral,” declared the girl. “The war is over, you are prospering immensely – so what on earth causes you to worry?”

“I’m not worrying, dearest, I assure you,” he replied with a forced smile, but her keen woman’s intuition told her that her lover was not himself, and that his mind was full of some very keen anxiety.

Charles Otley had taken her to a most amusing play at the Palais-Royal, a comedy which had kept the house in roars of laughter all the evening, and now, as they sat at supper, she saw that his spirits had fallen to a very low ebb. This puzzled her greatly.

Peggy Urquhart, daughter of Sir Polworth Urquhart, of the Colonial Service, who until the Armistice had held a high official appointment at Hong Kong, was one of the smartest and prettiest young women in London Society. She was twenty-two, a thorough-going out-of-door girl who looked slightly older than she really was. Her father had retired as soon as war was over, and they had come to England. By reason of her mother being the daughter of the Earl of Carringford, she had soon found herself a popular figure in a mad, go-ahead post-war set.

She had known Charlie Otley soon after she had left Roedene – long before they had gone out to Hong Kong – and now they

were back they were lovers in secret.

Charlie, who had been a motor engineer before he “joined up” in the war and got his D.S.O. and his rank as captain, had done splendidly. On being demobilized he had returned to his old profession, taking the managership of a very well-known Bond Street firm.

The directors, finding in Otley a man who knew his business, whose persuasive powers induced many persons to purchase cars, and whose fearless tests at Brooklands were paragraphed in the daily newspapers, treated him most generously and left everything, even many of their financial affairs, in his hands.

Lady Urquhart was, however, an ambitious woman. She inherited all the exclusiveness of the Carringfords, and she was actively scheming to marry Peggy to Cis Eastwood, the heir to the estates of old Lord Drumone. It was the old story of the ambitious mother. Peggy knew this, and, smiling within herself, had pledged her love to Charlie. Hence, with the latitude allowed to a girl nowadays, she went about a good deal with him in London – to the Embassy, the Grafton, the Diplomats, and several of the smartest dance-clubs, of which both were members.

Though Otley was often at her house in Mount Street, and frequently met Lord Drumone’s fair-haired and rather effeminate son there, Peggy’s mother never dreamed they were in love. Both were extremely careful to conceal it, and in their efforts they had been successful.

The orchestra was at the moment playing that plaintive Hungarian gypsy air, Bela's *Valse Banffy*, that sweet, weird song of the Tziganes which one hears everywhere along the Danube from Vienna to Belgrade.

"Look here, Charlie," said the girl, much perturbed at what she had recognized in his handsome countenance. "Tell me, Old Thing, what's the matter?"

"Matter – why, nothing!" he replied, laughing. "I was only thinking." And he looked around upon the smart crowd of Parisians who were laughing and chatting.

"Of what?"

He hesitated for a second. In that hesitation the girl who loved him so fondly, and who preferred him to old Drumone's son and a title, realized that he had some heavy weight upon his mind, and quickly she resolved to learn it, and try to bear the burden with him.

Since her return from China, with all its Asiatic mysteries, its amusements, and its quaint Eastern life, she had had what she declared to be a "topping" time in London. Her beauty was remarked everywhere and her sweet charm of manner appealed to all. Her mother, who had returned from her exile in the Far East, went everywhere, while her father, a hard, austere Colonial official who had browsed upon reports, and regarded all natives of any nationality or culture as mere "blacks," was one of those men who had never been able to assimilate his own views with those of the nation to which he had been sent as

British representative. He was a hide-bound official, a man who despised any colored race, and treated all natives with stern and unrelenting hand. Indeed, the Colonial Office had discovered him to be a square peg in a round hole, and at Whitehall they were relieved when he went into honorable retirement.

“Do tell me what’s the matter, dear,” whispered the girl across the table, hoping that the pair seated near them did not know English.

“The matter! Why, nothing,” again laughed the handsome young man. “Have a liqueur,” and he ordered two from the waiter. “I can’t think what you’ve got into your head to-night regarding me, Peggy. I was only reflecting for a few seconds – on some business.”

“Grave business – it seems.”

“Not at all. But we men who have to earn our living by business have to think overnight what we are to do on the morrow,” he said airily, as he handed his cigarette-case to her and then lit the one she took.

“But Charlie – I’m certain there’s something – something you are concealing from me.”

“I conceal nothing from you, dearest,” he answered, looking across the little table straight into her fine dark eyes. Then again he bent towards her and whispered very seriously: “Do you really love me, Peggy?”

In his glance was a tense eager expression, yet upon his face was written a mystery she could not fathom.

“Why do you ask, dear?” she said. “Have I not told you so a hundred times. What I have said, I mean.”

“You really mean – you really mean that you love me – eh?” he whispered in deep earnestness as he still bent to her over the table, his eyes fixed on hers. And he drew a long breath.

“Yes,” she answered. “But why do you ask the question in that tone? How tragic you seem!”

“Because,” and he sighed, “because your answer lifts a great weight from my mind.” Then, after a pause, he added: “Yet – yet, I wonder – ”

“Wonder what?”

“Nothing,” he answered. “I was only wondering.”

“But you really are tantalizing to-night, my dear boy,” she said. “I don’t understand you at all.”

“Ah! you will before long. Let’s go out into the lounge,” he suggested. “It’s growing late.”

So, having drained their two glasses of triple sec, they passed out into the big palm-lounge, which is so popular with the Parisians after the play.

Peggy and her parents had come to Paris in mid-December to do some shopping. Before she had been exiled to China, Lady Urquhart’s habit was to go to Paris twice each year to buy her hats and gowns, for she was always elegantly dressed, and she took care that her daughter should dress equally well.

Indeed, the gown worn by Peggy that night was one of Worth’s latest creations, and her cloak was an expensive one of the newest

mode. They were staying at the Continental when Charlie, who had some business in Paris on behalf of his firm, had run over for three days really to meet in secret the girl he loved. That night Peggy had excused herself to her mother, saying that she was going out to Neuilly to dine with an old schoolfellow – a little matter she had arranged with the latter – but instead, she had met Charlie at Voisin's, and they had been to the theater together.

Peggy, amid the exuberant atmosphere of Paris with its lights, movement and gaiety – the old Paris just as it was before the war – naturally expected her lover to be gay and irresponsible as she herself felt. Instead, he seemed gloomy and apprehensive. Therefore the girl was disappointed. She thought a good deal, but said little.

Though the distance between the Volnay and the Rue de Rivoli was not great, Charlie ordered a taxi, and on the way she sat locked in his strong arms, her lips smothered with his hot, passionate kisses, until they parted.

Little did she dream, however, the bitterness in her lover's heart.

Next morning at eleven o'clock, as Peggy was coming up the Avenue de l'Opéra, she passed the Brasserie de la Paix, that popular café on the left-hand side of the broad thoroughfare, the place where the Parisian gets such exquisite dishes at fair prices. Charlie was seated in the window, as they had arranged, and on seeing her, he dashed out and joined her.

“Well?” she asked. “How are you to-day? Not so awfully

gloomy, I hope.”

“Not at all, dearest,” he laughed, for his old nonchalance had returned to him. “I’ve been full of business since nine o’clock. I have an appointment out at La Murette at two, and I’ll have to get back to London to-night.”

“To-night!” she echoed disappointedly. “We don’t return till next Tuesday.”

“I have to be back to see my people about some cars that can’t be delivered for another six weeks. There’s a beastly hitch about delivery.”

“Well,” said the girl, as they walked side by side in the cold, bright morning. The winter mornings are always bright and clearer in Paris than in London. “Well, I have some news for you, dear.”

“What news?” he asked.

“Lady Teesdale has asked us up to Hawstead, her place in Yorkshire. In her letter to mother this morning she mentions that she is also asking you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. And, of course, you’ll accept. Won’t it be ripping? The Teesdales have a lovely old place – oak-paneled, ghost-haunted, and all that sort of thing. We’ve been there twice. The Teesdales’ shooting-parties are famed for their fun and merriment.”

“I know Lady Teesdale,” Otley said. “But I wonder why she has asked me?”

“Don’t wonder, dear boy – but accept and come. We’ll have

a real jolly time.”

And then they turned into the Boulevard des Italiens and idled before some of the shops.

At noon she was compelled to leave him and return to her mother. He put her into a taxi outside the Grand Hotel, and then they parted.

Before doing so, the girl said:

“What about next Wednesday? Shall we meet?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Very well,” she exclaimed. “Wednesday at six – eh? I’ll come up to your rooms. We can talk there. I don’t like to see you so worried, dear. There’s something you’re concealing from me, I’m sure of it.”

Then he bent over her hand in a fashion more courtly than the “Cheerio!” of to-day, and standing on the curb watched the taxi speed down the Rue de la Paix.

“Ah!” he murmured aloud, drawing a deep sigh. “Ah! If she only knew! —*if she only knew!*”

He strode along the boulevard caring nothing where his footsteps led him. The gay, elegant, careless crowd of Paris passed, but he had no eyes for it all.

“Shall I tell her?” he went on aloud to himself. “Or shall I fade out, and let her learn the worst after I’m gone? Yet would not that be a coward’s action? And I’m no coward. I went through the war – that hell at Vimy, and I did my best for King and Country. Now, when love happens and all that life means to a man is just

within my grasp, I have to retire to ignominy or death. I prefer the latter.”

Next morning he stepped from the train at Victoria and drove to his rooms in Bennett Street, St. James's. He was still obsessed by those same thoughts which had prevented him from sleeping for the past week. His man, Sanford, who had been his batman in France, met him with a cheery smile, and after a bath and a shave he went round to his business in Bond Street.

He was of good birth and had graduated at Brasenose. His father had been a well-known official at the Foreign Office in the days of King Edward and had died after a short retirement. In his life Charlie had done his best, and had distinguished himself not only in his Army career, but in that of the world of motoring, where his name was as well known as any of the fearless drivers at Brooklands.

Otley was, indeed, a real good fellow, whose personality dominated those with whom he did business, and the many cars, from Fords to Rolls, which he sold for the profit of his directors paid tribute to his easy-going merriment and his slim, well-set-up appearance. Those who met him in that showroom in Bond Street never dreamed of the alert leather-coated and helmeted figure who tore round the rough track at Brooklands testing cars, and so often rising up that steep cemented slope, the test of great speed.

At six o'clock on the Wednesday evening he stood in his cosy room in Bennett Street awaiting Peggy. At last there was a ring

at the outer door, and Sanford showed her in.

She entered merrily, bringing with her a whiff of the latest Paris perfume, and grasping his hand, cried:

“Well, are you feeling any happier?”

“Happier!” he echoed. “Why, of course!”

“And have you had Lady Teesdale’s letter?”

“Yes. And I’ve accepted.”

“Good. We’ll have a real good time. But the worst of it is Cis has been asked too!”

“I suppose your mother engineered that?”

“I don’t think so. You see, he’s Lady Teesdale’s nephew. And it’s a big family party. Old Mr. Bainbridge, the steel king of Sheffield, and his wife are to be there. She is a fat, rather coarse woman who has wonderful jewels. They say that old Bainbridge gave eighty thousand pounds for a unique string of stones, emeralds, diamonds, rubies and sapphires which belonged to the old Sultan of Turkey, Abdul Hamid, and which were sold in Paris six months ago.”

“Yes. I’ve always heard that the old fellow has money to burn. Wish I had!”

“So do I, Charlie. But, after all, money isn’t everything. What shall we do to-night?”

“Let’s dance later on – shall we?” he suggested, and she consented readily.

They sat by the fire together for half an hour chatting, while she told him of her doings in Paris after he had left. Then she

rose and made an inspection of his bachelor room, examining his photographs, as was her habit. Ten years ago a girl would hesitate to go to a bachelor's room, but not so to-day when women can venture wherever men can go.

On that same afternoon Sir Polworth Urquhart, returning home to Mount Street at six o'clock, found among his letters on the study table a thin one which bore a Hong Kong stamp. The superscription was, he saw, in a native hand. He hated the sly Chinese and all their ways.

On tearing it open he found within a slip of rice-paper on which some Chinese characters had been traced. He looked at them for a few seconds and then translated them aloud to himself:

“Tai-K'an has not forgotten the great English mandarin!”

“Curse Tai-K'an!” growled Sir Polworth under his breath. “After ten years I thought he had forgotten. But those Orientals are slim folk. I hope his memory is a pleasant one,” he added grimly as he rose and placed the envelope and the paper in the fire.

“A very curious message,” he reflected as he passed back to his writing-table. “It's a threat – because of that last sign. I remember seeing that sign before and being told that it was the sign of vengeance of the Tchan-Yan, the secret society of the Yellow Riband. But, bah! what need I care? I'm not in China now – thank Heaven!”

As he seated himself to answer his correspondence, however, a curious drama rose before his eyes. One day, ten years ago,

while acting as Deputy-Governor, he had had before him a criminal case in which a young Chinese girl was alleged to have caused her lover's death by poison. The girl was the daughter of a small merchant named Tai-K'an, who sold all his possessions in order to pay for the girl's defense.

The case was a flimsy one from the start, but in the native court where it was heard there was much bribery by the friends of the dead lover. Notwithstanding the fact that Tai-K'an devoted the whole of his possessions to his daughter's defense, and that strong proof of guilt fell upon a young Chinaman who was jealous of the dead man, the poor girl was convicted of murder.

Sir Polworth remembered all the circumstances well. At the time he did not believe in the girl's guilt, but the court had decided it so, therefore why should he worry his official mind over the affairs of mere natives? The day came – he recollected it well – when the sentence of death was put before him for confirmation. Tai-K'an himself, a youngish man, came to his house to beg the clemency of the great British mandarin. With him was his wife and the brother of the murdered man. All three begged upon their knees that the girl should be released because she was innocent. But he only shook his head, and with callous heartlessness signed the death-sentence and ordered them to be shown out.

The girl's father then drew himself up and, with the fire of hatred in his slant black eyes, exclaimed in very good English:
“You have sent my daughter to her death though she is

innocent! You have a daughter, Sir Polworth Urquhart. The vengeance of Tai-K'an will fall upon her. Remember my words! May the Great Mêng place his curse upon you and yours for ever!" And the trio left the Deputy-Governor's room.

That was nearly ten years ago.

He paced the room, for his reflections even now were uneasy ones. He remembered how the facts were placed before the Colonial Office and how the sentence of death was commuted to one of imprisonment. For five years she remained in jail, until the real assassin committed suicide after writing a confession.

Yet like all Chinese, Tai-K'an evidently nursed his grievance, and time had not dulled the bitterness of his hatred.

But the offensive Chinaman was in Hong Kong – therefore what mattered, Sir Polworth thought. So he seated himself and wrote his letters.

CHAPTER XIV

THE VENGEANCE OF TAI-K'AN

At that moment Lola, who was shopping in London, entered and her father cut off quickly.

The girl glanced at me and smiled. Then she asked some question regarding the purchase of some cutlery, and on her father replying she left the flat.

After she had gone, he resumed the narrative, which was certainly of deep interest, as you will see.

He went on:

In the first week in January, a gay house-party assembled at Hawstead Park, Lord Teesdale's fine old Elizabethan seat a few miles from Malton, not very far from Overstow. The shooting-parties at Hawstead were well known for their happy enjoyment. They were talked about in the drawing-rooms of Yorkshire and clubs in town each year, for Lady Teesdale was one of the most popular of hostesses and delighted in surrounding herself with young people.

So it was that Charlie Otley, on his arrival, met Peggy in the big paneled hall, and by her side stood young Eastwood, the fair-haired effeminate son of Lord Drumone. The party assembled at tea consisted of some twenty guests, most of them young. After dinner that night there was, of course, dancing upon the fine

polished floor.

Before Lady Urquhart, Otley was compelled to exercise a good deal of caution, allowing young Eastwood to dance attendance upon Peggy while he, in turn, spent a good deal of time with Maud Bainbridge, the rather angular daughter of the steel magnate. Towards Mrs. Bainbridge and his hostess Charlie was most attentive, but all the time he was watching Peggy with the elegant young idler to whom Lady Urquhart hoped to marry her.

Now and then Peggy would glance across the room meaningly, but he never once asked her to dance, so determined was he that her mother should not suspect the true state of affairs. His position, however, was not a very pleasant one, therefore part of the time he spent in the great old smoking-room with his host, Sir Polworth, and several other guests, some of them being women, for nowadays the ladies of a country house-party invariably invade the room which formerly was sacred to the men.

When the dance had ended and the guests were about to retire, Otley managed to whisper a word to the girl he loved. He made an appointment to meet her at a secluded spot in the park near the lodge on the following morning at eleven.

She kept the appointment, and when they met she stood for a few moments clasped in her lover's arms.

"I had such awful difficulty to get away from Cecil," she said, laughing. She looked a sweet attractive figure in her short tweed

skirt, strong country shoes and furs. "He wanted to go for a walk with me. So I slipped out and left him guessing."

Her companion remained silent.

A few moments later they turned along a path which led to a stile, and thence through a thick wood of leafless oaks and beeches. Along the winding path carpeted with dead leaves they strolled hand-in-hand, until suddenly Otley halted, and in a thick hoarse voice quite unusual to him, said:

"Peggy. I – I have something to say to you. I – I have to go back to London."

"To London – why?" gasped the girl in dismay.

"Because – well, because I can't bear to be here with the glaring truth ever before me – that I –"

"What do you mean?" she asked, laying her hand upon his arm.

"I mean, dearest," he said in a low, hard voice, "I mean that we can never marry. There is a barrier between us – a barrier of disgrace!"

"Of disgrace!" she gasped. "Oh! do explain, dear."

"The explanation is quite simple," he replied in a tone of despair. "You asked me in Paris what worried me. Well, Peggy, I'll confess to you," he went on, lowering his voice, his eyes downcast. "I am not worthy your love, and I here renounce it, for – for I am a thief!"

"A thief!" she echoed. "How?"

"I've been hard up of late, and at the motor show I sold three

cars, for which I have not accounted to the firm. The books will be audited next week and my defalcations discovered. I have no means of repaying the four thousand five hundred pounds, and therefore I shall be arrested and sent to prison as a common thief. That's briefly the position!"

The girl was speechless at such staggering revelations. Charlie – a thief! It seemed incredible.

"But have you no means whatever of raising the money?" she asked at last, her face pale, while the gloved hand that lay upon his arm trembled.

"None. I've tried all my friends, but money is so difficult to raise nowadays. No, Peggy," he added with suppressed emotion, "let me go my own way – and try to forget me. Now that I am in disgrace it is only right that I should make a clean breast of it to you, and then you alone will understand why I have made excuse to Lady Teesdale and left."

"Oh, you mustn't do that, dear," she urged. "Stay over the week-end! Something will turn up. Do please me by staying."

"I feel that I really can't," he answered. "I'm an outsider to have thus brought unhappiness on you, but it is my fault. I am alone to blame. You must have your freedom and forget me. I took the money to pay a debt of honor, thinking that I could repay it by borrowing elsewhere. But I find I can't, therefore I must face the music next week. Even if I ran away I should soon be found and arrested."

"Poor boy!" sighed the girl, stroking his cheek tenderly, while

in her eyes showed the light of unshed tears. "Don't worry. Stay here with me – at least till Monday."

But he shook his head sadly.

"I couldn't bear it, my darling," he answered in a low voice. "How can I possibly enjoy dancing and fun when I know that in a few days I shall go to prison in disgrace. My firm are not the kind of people to let me off."

"Four thousand five hundred!" the girl repeated as though to herself.

"Yes. And I haven't the slightest prospect of getting it anywhere. If I could only borrow it I could sail along into smooth waters again. But that is quite out of the question."

Peggy remained silent for a few moments. Then, of a sudden, she looked straight into her lover's eyes, and taking his hand in hers said:

"Poor dear! What can I do to help you?"

"Nothing," was his low reply. "Only – only forget me. That's all. You can't marry a man who's been to prison."

Again a silence fell between them, while the dead leaves whirled along the path.

"But you will stay here over the week-end, won't you, dear?" she urged. "I ask you to do so. Do not refuse me – will you?"

He tried to excuse himself. But she clung to him and kissed him, declaring that at least they might spend the week-end together before he left to face the worst.

Her lover endeavored to point out the impossibility of their

marriage, but she remained inexorable.

“I still love you, Charlie – even though you are in such dire straits. And I do not intend that you shall go back to London to brood over your misfortune. Keep a stout heart, dear, and something may turn up after all,” she added, as they turned and went slowly back over the rustling leaves towards the park.

He now realized that she loved him with a strong and fervent affection, even though he had confessed to her his offense. And that knowledge caused his burden of apprehension the harder to bear.

That night there were, after the day’s shooting, merry junketings at Hawstead, and Charles Otley bore himself bravely though his heart was heavy. Ever and anon when Peggy had opportunity she whispered cheering words to him, words that encouraged him, though none of the gay party dreamed that they were chatting and dancing with a man who would in a few days stand in a criminal dock.

Next day was Sunday. The whole house-party attended the village church in the morning, and in the afternoon the guests split up and went for walks.

Soon after dinner Otley, whose seat had been between the steel magnate’s wife and her daughter, went outside on the veranda alone. He was in no mood for bridge and preferred a breath of air outside. As he let himself out by one of the French windows of the small drawing-room in the farther wing of the house, a dark figure brushed past him swiftly, and next second

had vaulted over the ironwork of the veranda and was lost in the dark bushes beyond.

As the stranger had paused to leap from the veranda, a ray of light from the window had caught his countenance. It was only for one brief second, yet Charlie had felt convinced that the countenance was that of a Chinaman. Besides the stealthy cat-like movement of the man was that of an Oriental. Yet what could a Chinaman be doing about that house?

He was half inclined to tell his host, yet on reflecting, he thought the probability was that it was some stranger who, attracted by the music and laughter within, had been trying to get a glimpse of the gay party.

That night, as the auction bridge proceeded, Otley withdrew from it and went to his room, where he sat down and wrote two notes – one to Peggy and the other to his hostess. In the latter he apologized that he had been suddenly recalled to London on some very urgent business, and that he would leave Malton by the first train in the morning.

The note to Peggy he placed in his pocket, and returning to the room where they were now dancing, found her in a flimsy cream gown, sleeveless and cut low – a dress that suited her to perfection – dancing with apparent merriment with young Eastwood, though he knew that her heart was sad. But her face was flushed by excitement, and she was entering thoroughly into the country-house gayety. Presently, however, he was able to slip the note into her hand and whisper a good-by.

“I shall be in London on Tuesday and will call at Bennett Street in the evening. We will then talk it all over, dear. Don’t despair – for my sake – don’t despair!” she said.

And compelled to slip back to the ballroom, she crushed the note into her corsage.

Early next morning a car took Charlie to the station, and soon after luncheon he reëntered his rooms. The day was Monday, wet and dreary. All hope had left him, for his defalcations must be discovered and the directors would, without a doubt, prosecute him. Hence he went about London interested in nothing and obsessed by the terrible disgrace which must inevitably befall him.

On the evening of his sudden departure from Hawstead, at about half-past six, the house-party was thrown into a state of great concern by the amazing announcement that Mrs. Bainbridge had lost her jewels – the unique string of precious stones which had once belonged to the late Sultan Abdul Hamid! Mrs. Bainbridge’s maid discovered the loss when her mistress went to dress for dinner.

She declared that on the previous evening she had placed them out upon a little polished table set against the heavy red-plush curtains and close to the dressing-table. She believed that her mistress had worn them upon her corsage on the Sunday night, and that on retiring she had locked them in her jewel-box. On the contrary, Mrs. Bainbridge did not wear them, a fact to which everyone testified. The millionaire’s wife had left the Sultan’s

famous jewels upon the little polished table when she descended for dinner on Sunday night, and naturally concluded that her maid – who had been with her over twelve years – would see them and place them in safety.

Suspicion instantly fell upon Charles Otley. Old Mr. Bainbridge was, of course, furious, whereupon Lord Teesdale took it upon himself to go at once to London to see Otley.

This he did, and when that afternoon Sanford showed his lordship unexpectedly into the room, the young man stood aghast at the news.

“Tell me, Otley – if you know nothing of this affair – why, then, did you leave Hawstead so suddenly?” he demanded.

“Because I had business here in town,” was his reply. Instantly across his mind flashed the recollection of the incident of the fleeting figure which he believed to be that of an Oriental. He related to his late host the exact facts. But Lord Teesdale listened quite unimpressed. As a matter of fact, he felt, in his own mind, that the young fellow was the thief.

The story of the Chinaman was far too fantastic for his old-fashioned mind. He had heard of the Chinese, the opium traffic and suchlike things, and he saw in Otley’s statement a distinct attempt to mislead him.

The police were not called in because Mr. Bainbridge did not desire to bring the Teesdales’ house-party into the newspapers, and, moreover, both he and his wife were confident that young Otley was the thief.

Peggy hearing her lover denounced so openly, was naturally full of indignation, though she hardly dared show it.

Sir Polworth and his wife and daughter returned to London as early as possible, for the spirits of all the guests had fallen in consequence of Mrs. Bainbridge's loss.

And now a curious thing happened.

That evening Charlie, knowing himself under suspicion of stealing the jewels, had an intuition that it would be better if Peggy did not visit him at Bennett Street. Therefore at about half-past five, when darkness had fallen, he went along to Mount Street, and there watched outside Sir Polworth's house.

After a little while an empty taxi which had evidently been summoned by telephone, stopped at the door, and Peggy, very plainly dressed, got into it and drove away. Another taxi happened to be near, therefore her lover, unable to shout and stop her, got into it and followed her.

They went along Piccadilly, and passing Arlington Street, which led into Bennett Street, continued away to the Strand and across the City eastward, until Otley was seized with curiosity as to the girl's destination.

Past Aldgate went the taxi and down Commercial Road East, that broad long thoroughfare that leads to the East India Docks. At Limehouse Church the taxi stopped, and Peggy alighted and paid the man.

Almost immediately a young man, the cut of whose overcoat and the angle of whose hat at once marked him as a Spaniard,

approached her. Otley, full of wonder, had alighted from his taxi at some distance away and was eagerly watching.

Peggy and the stranger exchanged a few words, whereupon he started off along a narrow and rather ill-lit road called Three Colt Street, past Limehouse Causeway. Suddenly it occurred to the young man that they were in the center of London's Chinatown! He recollected the escaping Chinaman from Lord Teesdale's house! But why was Peggy there? Surely she was not a drug-taker! The very thought caused him to shudder.

Silently he followed the pair before him, and saw them turn into a narrow by-street and halt at a small house. Her conductor knocked on the door four times. And then repeated the summons.

The door opened slowly and they entered. Then, when the door was closed again, Peggy's lover crept along and listened at the shutter outside.

Why was she there? He stood bewildered. She had promised to call upon him at his rooms, and yet she was there in that low-class house – a veritable den it seemed!

The window was closely shuttered, as were all in that mysterious silent thoroughfare – one into which the police would hardly venture to penetrate alone.

The young man listened, his ears strained to catch any sound.

Suddenly he heard Peggy shriek. He listened breathlessly. Yes, it was her voice raised distinctly.

“You!” he heard her cry. “You! You are Tai-K'an! My father has told me of you!”

“Ye-es, my lil ladee – you are lil ladee of the Engleesh mandarin!” he heard the reply – the reply of a Chinaman. “I now take my vengeance for my own child as I have each year promised. Give me the pretty jewels. You wanted to sell them, eh? But you will give them to me! I watched you take them from the table while they were all at the party. Your father never thought that Tai-K’an followed you on your country journey, eh?”

Otley heard the words faintly through the shutters and stood rooted to the spot.

Peggy was the thief? She had wanted to sell them and had been entrapped. In an instant he realized her position.

He heard her voice raised first in faint protest, and then she implored the Chinaman to release her.

“Ah, no!” cried the cruel triumphant Oriental. “Tai-K’an warned your father that he would have his revenge. His daughter was to him as much as you are to your own father the mandarin,” and he laughed that short, grating laugh of the Chinaman, which caused Otley to clench his fists.

For a few seconds he hesitated as to how he should act. Then, quick as his feet could carry him, he dashed back into the Commercial Road, where he enlisted the aid of a constable.

Together they hurried back to the house after the young man had made a brief statement that a white girl had been entrapped.

At first they were denied admittance, but when the constable demanded that the door should be opened, the bars were drawn

and they entered the wretched den.

Peggy was naturally terrified until she heard her lover's voice, and a few seconds later the pair were locked once more in each other's arms, but the gems of Abdul Hamid were nowhere to be found. Indeed, neither Peggy nor Charlie dared mention the stolen jewels, so the Chinaman kept them.

"Do you wish to charge this Chink?" asked the constable of the girl. "If so, I'll take him along to the station at once."

But at Charlie's suggestion she would prefer no charge, and after profuse thanks to the policeman, they found a taxi and drove back at once to Bennett Street.

On the way Peggy sobbed as she confessed to the theft; how, in desperation, she had stolen those wonderful jewels from Mrs. Bainbridge's room in the hope of raising sufficient money to pay Charlie's defalcations, and how she had two days later received a mysterious letter asking her if she happened to have any discarded jewelry that she wished to dispose of secretly. If she had, an appointment could be made at Limehouse Church. It was, she thought, an opportunity. So she took the jewels to sell to them. But to her amazement and horror she had found herself in the hands of the revengeful Chinaman who had a, possibly just, grievance against her father.

Rayne, taking the magnificent jewels and running them through his hands, said:

"The Chink is a friend of ours, and we've had our eye upon these stones for a very long time, but rather than the

young fellow and the girl shall be ruined I am sending them back to Mrs. Bainbridge's anonymously by to-night's post. Sir Polworth Urquhart will think they have come from Tai-K'an. See, Hargreave? I've typed out a letter. Just pack them up and address them to her. I can't bear to take them now I know the truth – poor girl!"

And he handed the gems over to me, together with a small wooden box.

That evening I registered the box from the post office at Darlington, and three days later Charles Otley, who had managed to clear himself of all suspicion, received an anonymous gift of four thousand five hundred pounds which had been placed to his credit at the bank.

And none of the actors in that strange drama suspect the hand of the clever, unscrupulous, but sometimes generous, Squire of Overstow.

CHAPTER XV

OTHER PEOPLE'S MONEY

“

Mr. Hargreave, father is sending you upon a very strange mission,” Lola told me in confidence one dull morning, after we had had breakfast at the Midland Hotel, in Manchester, where we three were staying about a fortnight after Rayne’s generosity in returning the famous jewels of the dead Sultan.

“What kind of mission?” I inquired with curiosity, as we sat together in the lounge prior to going out to idle at the shop windows.

“I don’t know its object at all,” was her reply. “But from what I’ve gathered it is something most important. I – I do hope you will take care of yourself – won’t you?” she asked appealingly.

“Why, of course,” I laughed. “I generally manage to take care of myself. I’d do better, however, if – well, if I were not associated with Duperré and the rest,” I added bitterly.

The pretty girl was silent for a few moments. Then she said:

“Of course you won’t breathe a word of what I’ve said, will you?”

“Certainly not, Lola,” was my reply. “Whatever you tell me never passes my lips.”

“I know – I know I can trust you, Mr. Hargreave,” she

exclaimed. "Well, in this matter there are several mysterious circumstances. I believe it is something political my father wants to work – some business which concerns something in the Near East. That's all I know. You will, in due course, hear all about it. And now let's go along to Deansgate. I want to buy something."

In consequence we strolled along together, Rayne having gone out an hour before to keep an appointment – with whom he carefully concealed from me.

That same night Rayne disclosed to me the mission which he desired me to carry out. He was a man of a hundred moods and as many schemes.

One fact which delighted me was that in the present suggestion there seemed no criminal intent. And for that reason I quite willingly left London for the Near East three days later.

My destination was Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, and the journey by the Orient Express across Europe was a long and tedious one.

I was much occupied with the piece of scheming which I had undertaken to carry out in Sofia. My patriotism had led me to attempt a very difficult task – one which would require delicate tact and a good deal of courage and resource, but which would, if successful, Rayne had said, mean that a loan of three millions would be raised in London, and that British influence would become paramount in that go-ahead country, which ere long must be the power of the Balkans.

The tentacles of the great criminal octopus which Rayne

controlled were indeed far-spread. In this he was making a bid for fortune, without a doubt.

To the majority of people, the Balkan States are, even to-day, *terra incognita*. The popular idea is that they are wild, inaccessible countries, inhabited by brigands. That is not so. True, there are brigands, even now after the war, in the Balkans, but Belgrade, the Serbian capital, is as civilized as Berlin, and the main boulevard of Sofia, whither I was bound, is at night almost a replica of the Boulevard des Italiens.

I knew, however, that there were others in Sofia upon the same errand as myself, emissaries of other Governments and other financial houses. Therefore in those three long, never-ending days and nights which the journey occupied, my mind was constantly filled with the thoughts of the best and most judicious course to pursue in order to attain my object.

The run East was uneventful, save for one fact – at the Staatsbahnhof, at Vienna, just before our train left for Budapest, a queer, fussy little old man in brown entered and was given the compartment next to mine.

His nationality I could not determine. He spoke in a deep guttural voice with the fair-bearded conductor of the train, but by his clothes – which were rather dandified for so old a man – I did not believe him to be a native of the Fatherland.

I heard him rumbling about with his bags in the next compartment, apparently settling himself, when of a sudden, my quick ear caught an imprecation which he uttered to himself in

English.

A few hours later, at dinner in the *wagon-restaurant*, I found him placed at the same little table opposite me, and naturally we began to chat. He spoke in French, perfect French it was, but refused to speak English, though, of course, he could had he wished.

“Ah! *non*,” he laughed. “I cannot. Excuse me. My pronunciation is so faulty. Your English is so ve-ry deefecult!”

And so we talked in French, and I found the queer old fellow was on his way to Sofia. He seemed slightly deformed, his face was distinctly ugly, broad, clean-shaven, with a pair of black, piercing eyes that gave him a most striking appearance. His grey hair was long, his nose aquiline, his teeth protruding and yellow; and he was a grumbler of the most pronounced type. He growled at the food, at the service, at the draughts, at the light in the restaurant, at the staleness of the bread we had brought with us from Paris, and at the butter, which he declared to be only Danish margarine.

His complaints were amusing. At first the *maître d'hôtel* bustled about to do the bidding of the newcomer, but very quickly summed him up, and only grinned knowingly when called to listen to his biting sarcasm of the *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lit* and all its works.

Next day, at Semlin, where our passports were examined, the passport officer took off his hat to him, bowed low and *viséd* his passport without question, saying, as he handed back the

document to its owner:

“Bon voyage, Highness.”

I stared at the pair. My fussy friend with the big head must therefore be either a prince or a grand duke!

As I sat opposite him at dinner that night, he was discussing with me the harmful writings of some newly discovered Swiss author who was posing as a cheap philosopher, and denouncing them as dangerous to the community. He leaned his elbow upon the narrow table and supported his clean-shaven chin upon his fingers, displaying to me – most certainly by accident – the palm of his thin right hand.

What I discovered there caused me a great deal of surprise. In its center was a dark, livid mark, as though it had been branded there by a hot iron, the plain and distinct imprint of a pet dog’s pad!

It fascinated me. There was some hidden meaning in that mark, I felt convinced. It was just as though a small dog had stepped in blood with one of its forepaws and trodden upon his hand.

Whether he noticed that I had detected it or not, I cannot say, but he moved his hand quickly, and ever after kept it closed.

His name, he told me, was Konstantinos Vassos, and he lived in Athens. But I took that information *cum grano*, for I instinctively knew him to be a prince traveling incognito. Before the passport officer at Semlin, every one must pass before entering Serbia.

But if actually a prince, why did he carry a passport?

There is no good hotel at Sofia. The best is called the Grand Hôtel de Bulgarie, kept by a pleasant old lady, and in this we found ourselves next night installed. He, of course, gave his name as Vassos, and to all intents and purposes was more of a stranger in the Bulgarian capital than I myself was, for I had been there previously once just before the war.

Now Rayne had given me a letter of introduction to a certain Nicolas Titeroff, who contrived rather mysteriously to get me elected to the smart diplomats' club – the Union – during my stay.

The days passed. From the first morning of my arrival I found myself at once in the vortex of gayety; invitations poured in upon me – thanks to the black-bearded Titeroff – cards for dances here and there and receptions and dinners, while I spent each afternoon with Titeroff and a wandering Englishman named Mayhew, who told me he was an ex-colonel in the British Army.

All the while, I must confess, I was working my cards carefully. Thanks to the mysterious Titeroff I had received an introduction to Nicholas Petkoff, the grave, grey-haired Minister of Finance, who had early in life lost his right arm at the battle of the Shipka Pass – and he was inclined to admit my proposals. A French syndicate had approached him, but Petkoff would have none of them.

The mission entrusted to me by Rayne was one which, if I could obtain the Government Concession which I asked, would mean the formation of a great company and a matter of millions.

And it seemed to me that my black-bearded friend Titeroff, and Mayhew, were both pulling the strings cleverly for me in the right direction. Often I considered whether they were both crooks and members of the gang organized by Rayne. I could not determine.

One night at the weekly dance at the Military Club – a function at which the smart set of Sofia always attend, and at which the Ministers of State themselves with their women-folk put in an appearance – I had been waltzing with the Minister Petkoff's daughter, a pretty, dark-haired girl in blue, whom I had met at Titeroff's house – when presently the Turkish attaché, a pale-faced young man in a fez, introduced me to a tall, very handsome, sweet-faced girl in a black evening gown.

Mademoiselle Balesco was her name, and I found her inexpressibly charming. She spoke French perfectly, and English quite well. She had been at school in England, she said – at Scarborough. Her home was at Galatz, in Roumania.

We had several dances, and afterwards I took her down to supper. Then we had a couple of fox-trots, and I conducted her out to the car that was awaiting her and bowing, watched her drive off, alone.

But while doing so, there came along the pavement, out of the shadow, the short, ugly figure of the old Greek, Vassos, with his coat collar turned up, evidently passing without noticing me.

A few days later when in the evening I was chatting with Mayhew at the hotel, he said:

“What have you been up to, Hargreave? Look here! This letter

was left upon me, with a note, asking me to give it to you in secret. Looks like a woman's hand! Mind what you're about in this place, old chap. There are some nasty pitfalls, you know!"

With a bachelor's curiosity he was eager to know who was my fair correspondent. But I refused to satisfy him.

Suffice it to say that that same night I went alone to a house on the outskirts of Sofia, and there met, at her urgent request, Marie Balesco. After apologizing for thus approaching me and throwing all the *convenances* to the wind, she seemed to be highly interested in my welfare, and very inquisitive concerning the reasons that had brought me to Bulgaria.

Like most women of to-day, she smoked, and offered me her cigarette-case. I took one – a delicious one it was, but rather strong – so strong, indeed, that a strange drowsiness suddenly overcame me. Before I could fight against it, the small, well-furnished room seemed to whirl about me, and I must have fallen unconscious. Indeed, I knew no more until, on awakening, I found myself back in my bed at the Hôtel de Bulgarie.

I gazed at the morning sunshine upon the wall, and tried to recollect what had occurred.

My hand seemed strangely painful. Raising it from the sheets, I looked at it.

Upon my right palm, branded as by a hot iron, was the sign of the dog's pad!

Horrified, I stared at it! It was the same mark I had seen upon the hand of old Vassos! What could be its significance?

In a few days the burn healed, leaving a dark red scar, the distinct imprint of a dog's foot. From Mayhew I tried, by cautious questions, to obtain some information concerning the fair-faced girl who had played such a trick upon me. But he only knew her slightly. He amazed me by saying that she had been staying with a certain Madame Sovoff, who was something of a mystery, but had left Sofia.

Vassos, who was still at the hotel, annoyed me on account of his extreme politeness, and the manner in which he appeared to spy upon my movements.

I came across him everywhere. Inquiries concerning the reason of the ugly Greek's presence in Bulgaria met with a negative result. One thing seemed certain, he was not, as I believed, a prince incognito.

How I longed to go to him, show him the mark upon my hand, and demand an explanation. But my curiosity was aroused, therefore I patiently awaited developments, my revolver always ready in my pocket in case of foul play.

The mysterious action of the pretty girl from Galatz also puzzled me.

At last the Cabinet, after much political jugglery, being deposed, the Council were in complete accord with Petkoff regarding my proposals. All had been done in secret from the party in opposition, and one day I had lunched with His Excellency the Minister of Finance at his house in the suburbs of the city.

Nevertheless, I was obsessed by the strange mark which had been so mysteriously placed upon my hand – the same mark as that borne by the mysterious Vassos.

“You may send a cipher dispatch to London if you like, Mr. Hargreave,” said the Minister Petkoff, as we sat over our cigars. “The documents will be all signed at the Cabinet meeting at noon to-morrow. In exchange for this loan raised in London, all the contracts for the new quick-firing guns and ammunition go to your group of London financiers.”

Such was the welcome news His Excellency imparted to me, and you may imagine that I lost no time in writing out a well-concealed message to Rayne, and sending it by the manservant to the telegraph office.

For a long time I sat with His Excellency, and then he rose, inviting me to walk with him in the Boris Gardens, as was his habit every afternoon, before going down to the sitting of the Sobranje, or Parliament.

On our way we passed Vassos, who raised his hat politely to me.

“Who’s that man?” inquired the Minister quickly, and I told him all I knew concerning the old fellow.

He grunted.

In the pretty public garden we were strolling together in the sundown, chatting upon the European unrest after the war, the new loan, and other matters, when, of a sudden, a black-mustached man in a dark grey overcoat and a round fur cap

sprang from the bushes at a lonely spot, and, raising a big service revolver, fired point-blank at His Excellency.

I felt for my own weapon. Alas! it was not there! *I had forgotten it!*

The assassin, seeing the Minister reel and fall, turned his weapon upon me. Thereupon in an instant I threw up my hands, crying that I was unarmed, and an Englishman.

As I did so, he started back as though terrified, and with a spring he disappeared again into the bushes.

All had happened in a few brief instants, for ere I could realize that a tragedy had actually occurred, I found the unfortunate Minister lying lifeless at my feet. My friend had been shot through the heart! It was a repetition of the assassination of the Minister Stambuloff.

Readers of the newspapers will recollect the tragic affair which is, no doubt, still fresh in their minds.

I told the Chief of Police of Sofia of my strange experience, and showed him the mark upon my palm. Though detectives searched high and low for the Greek, for Madame Sovoff, and for the fascinating mademoiselle, none of them was ever found.

The assassin was, nevertheless, arrested a week later, while trying to cross the frontier into Serbia. I, of course, lost by an ace Rayne's great financial *coup*, but before execution the prisoner made a confession which revealed the existence of a terrible and widespread conspiracy, fostered by Turkey, to remove certain members of the Cabinet who were in favor of British protection

and assistance.

Quite unconsciously I had, it seemed, become an especial favorite of the silent, watchful old Konstantinos Vassos. Fearing lest I, in my innocence, should fall a victim with His Excellency – being so often his companion – he had, with the assistance of the pretty Marie Balesco, contrived to impress upon my palm the secret sign of the conspirators.

To this fact I certainly owe my life, for the assassin – a stranger to Sofia, who had been drawn by lot – would, no doubt, have shot me dead, had he not seen the secret sign upon my raised hand.

When I returned to Overstow and related my strange adventure, Rayne was furious that just at the very moment when the deal by which he was to reap such a huge profit was complete, our friend the Minister should have been assassinated.

Lola was in the room when I described all that had occurred, listening breathlessly to my narrative.

I showed them both the strange mark upon my palm, a brand which I suppose I shall bear to my dying day.

“Then you really owe your life to that girl Balesco, Mr. Hargreave?” she said, raising her fine dark eyes to mine.

“I certainly do,” I replied.

Her father grunted, and after congratulating me upon my escape, said:

“You had nothing to complain about regarding Titeroff, and the assistance he and Mayhew gave you – eh?”

“Nothing. Without them I could never have acted. Indeed, I

could never have approached the Minister Petkoff.”

“Yes,” he remarked reflectively. “They’re both wily birds. Titeroff feathered his nest well when he was in Constantinople, and Mayhew is there because of a little bit of serious trouble in Genoa a couple of years ago. Of course you never mentioned my name – eh?”

“I only mentioned you as Mr. Goodwin – as you told me,” I replied.

He smiled.

“They remembered me, of course?”

“Yes, when I delivered your note of introduction to Titeroff, he at once made me welcome, and seemed much surprised that I was acquainted with his friend, Mr. Goodwin.”

It was now evident, as I had suspected, that the two men who were so eager to serve me were international crooks, and members of the great gang which Rayne controlled.

“Just describe the man Vassos as fully as you can,” urged Rayne.

In consequence I went into a minute description of the fussy old Greek, to which Rayne listened most interestedly.

“Yes,” he said at last. “But tell me one thing. Did you notice if he had any deformity?”

“Well – he walked with a distinct limp.”

“And his hand?”

“The little finger on his left hand was deformed,” I replied. “I now remember it.”

“Ah!” he cried in instant anger. “As I thought! It was old Boukaris – the sly old devil. How, I wonder, did he know that I had sent you to Sofia? He, no doubt, saved you by putting that mark on your hand, Hargreave; but the brutes have been one too many for me, and have done me down!”

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN WHO WAS SHY

Some two months after that curious experience in Sofia, we were guests of some friends of Rayne's called Baynes, who lived at Enderby Manor, a few miles out of Winchester.

The reason of our visit was somewhat obscure, yet as far as I could gather it had no connection with "business." So Rayne, Lola, and myself spent a very pleasant four days with one of the most charming families I think I have ever met.

Enderby was a beautiful old place lying back in a great park and surrounded by woods, half-way between Winchester and Romsey, and George Baynes, who had made a fortune in South America, and whose wife was a Brazilian lady, was a splendid host.

One bright afternoon Rayne had gone off somewhere with Mr. Baynes, so I found Lola and we both went for a stroll in the beautiful woods.

For a long time we chatted merrily, when, of a sudden – I don't exactly know how it happened – but I took her hand, and, looking straight into her eyes, I declared my passion for her.

I must have taken her unawares, for she drew back with a strange, half-frightened expression. Her breath came and went in quick gasps, and when she found her tongue, she replied:

“No, George. It is impossible – quite impossible!”

“Why?” I demanded quickly. “I love you, Lola. Can you never reciprocate my affection?”

She shook her head sadly, but still allowing me to hold her soft little hand.

“You must not speak of love,” she whispered. “You are an honest man who has been entrapped and compelled to act dishonestly as you do. I know it all, alas! I – I know – ” and she burst into tears. “I have discovered,” she sobbed, “that my father is a thief!”

“We cannot help that, Lola,” I said, in deep sympathy at her distress.

“No. Unfortunately we can’t,” she replied faintly, in a voice full of emotion. “But it would be fatal to us both if we loved each other. Surely, George, you can see that!”

“I don’t see it, dearest,” I exclaimed, bending and kissing her fondly on the cheek for the first time. We had halted in the forest path, and now I held her in my arms, though she resisted slightly. “I love you, darling!” I cried. *“I love you!”*

“No! No!” she protested. “You must not – you cannot love me. I am only the daughter of a man who, at any moment, might be arrested – a man for whom the police are ever in search, but cannot find.”

“I know all that; but you, dearest, are not a thief!” I urged, for I loved her with all the strength of my being – with all my soul.

She trembled and sobbed, but did not reply. Her tearful face

was hidden upon my shoulder.

“Do you care for me in the least?” I whispered to her. “Tell me, dear, do.”

She was silent.

I repeated my question, until at last she raised her face to mine, and, though she did not speak, I knew with joy that her answer was in the affirmative. And then I poured out my secret to her, how ever since I had first seen her I had loved her to distraction; and how the knowledge that she reciprocated my affection had rendered me the happiest man in the world.

For a long time we remained locked in each other’s arms. How long I cannot tell.

Suddenly, when she had dried her tears, she seemed full of apprehension concerning my welfare.

“Oh! do be careful of yourself, George!” she cried. “I am always so anxious about you when you are away. Father sends you on those strange and highly dangerous missions because he trusts you, and you, alas! are compelled to do his bidding. But do take care. You know well what the slightest blunder would mean – and you would never clear yourself, you know!”

I promised I would take great care always, and again we moved along. It was not, however, until dusk that we returned to the Manor.

I could not help wondering how Lola had discovered her father’s true character and the nature of his secret “business,” but on the whole I felt it was just as well that she knew, for she

herself would exercise great care. And then I thought in ecstasy, “She is mine —*mine!*”

Just before midnight, soon after I had retired, the door of my room opened, and I found Rayne in his pajamas.

He placed his finger upon his lips with a gesture of silence. Then, closing the door noiselessly, he drew me to the opposite side of the room, and, showing me a photograph, said:

“Look at this well, George. You’d recognize him, wouldn’t you?”

It was a cabinet photograph of a good-looking gentlemanly, clean-shaven man of about twenty-five.

“Note his tiepin – a single moonstone!” added Rayne.

“Yes,” I said, as I gazed at the photograph.

“Well, to-day is Monday,” he said. “Next Thursday night I want you to take Madame from London in the Rolls. Go out on the Portsmouth Road by way of Kingston and Ditton, through Cobham, and on to Ripley. There, about twenty miles from London, you will find on the left-hand side an old-fashioned hotel called the Talbot. Stop there at half-past nine, and, leaving Madame in the car, go in and have a drink. Edward Houston will be awaiting you. Madame is just now at the Carlton. You will pick her up at half-past eight.”

“And Lola?” I asked, wondering if his daughter was to play any part in this new piece of trickery, whatever it might be.

“She is going to Scarborough on Thursday afternoon,” was her father’s reply.

“And when I meet this Mr. Houston,” I asked, “what then?”

“You will not meet openly. When you’ve had your drink and he has seen you, you will drive a little way along the road and there await him. He does not wish to be seen with you. He’s rather shy, you see!” and the pleasant-faced man who controlled the most dangerous criminal gang in Europe smiled sardonically. “He has his instructions, and you will follow them. Take a suitcase with you, for you may be away a few days, or longer.”

I wondered what devilry he had now planned. I tried to obtain from him some further details, but his replies were sharp and firm.

“Act just as I’ve told you, Hargreave. And please don’t be so infernally inquisitive.” Then, wishing me good night, he turned and left my room.

I longed there and then to defy him and refuse to obey, yet I dared not, knowing full well the fate that would await me if I resisted. Moreover, I had Lola to consider, and if I defied her father he most certainly would not allow his daughter to marry me.

Next morning we left Enderby by train and returned to Overstow in the late afternoon.

Duperré had gone up to Glasgow upon some mysterious business – crooked without a doubt – so that night, after dining together, Rayne and I played a game of billiards. While we were smoking in the library prior to turning in, the footman tapped at the door and entered with a note.

Rayne tore it open, and as he read it, I noticed that his countenance fell. A second later I saw that he was extremely annoyed.

He rose from his chair and for a few moments hesitated. Then, in a rather thick voice, said:

“Show him in.” After the servant had gone he turned to me, and in a changed voice said: “Remain here, George. But never breathe a word of what you hear to a living soul! Remember that!”

In a few moment a well-dressed, narrow-faced, bald-headed, rather cadaverous man was shown in. He clicked his heels together and bowed with foreign politeness and with a smile upon his sinister countenance.

“I have the honor to meet Signor Rayne?” he asked, with a distinctly Italian accent.

“That is my name,” replied Rudolph inquiringly.

“Good! Then you will recognize me, and my name upon my letter in which I have asked for this private interview.”

“No. I certainly do not,” he said. “I have no knowledge of ever meeting you before!”

“Ah!” laughed the stranger. “The signore’s memory is evidently at fault. I – I hesitate to refresh it – before this gentleman,” and he glanced at me.

“Oh! you need not mind. Mr. Hargreave is my secretary, and knows all my confidential affairs,” said Rayne, assuming an air of *bonhomie*, though I knew he was greatly perturbed by his visitor.

“Then may I be permitted to remind you of our meeting at the Bristol Café, in Copenhagen, on that July night two years ago, and what happened to Henri Gérard, the Marseilles shipowner, later that same night? True, we never spoke together, for you posed as a stranger to my friends. But you were pointed out to me. You surely cannot ignore it?”

“I have never been to Copenhagen in my life,” protested Rayne. “What do you suggest?”

“The truth; one that you know well, signore, notwithstanding your denials. You are the man known as ‘The Golden Face,’” declared the stranger bitterly, pointing his finger at him. “You neither forget me nor my name, Luigi Gori, for you have much cause to remember it – you and your friend Stevenson, otherwise Duperré.”

Rayne turned furiously upon his visitor, and said:

“I am in no mood to discuss anything with you. So get out! You wished to see me privately, and I have granted you this interview. I don’t know your name or your business, nor do I want to know them! You seem to be trying to claim acquaintance with me, and –”

“Pardon me, but I do so, Signor Rayne,” laughed the dark-eyed man. “It has taken me two years to trace you, and at last I find you here! I came at this hour because I thought I would find you apart from your honorable family.”

“What rubbish are you talking?” demanded Rayne.

“Rubbish!” echoed the stranger. “I am talking no rubbish. I

am simply reminding you of a very serious and secret matter, namely, the mysterious end of Monsieur Gérard, of the Château du Sierroz in the Jura, and of the Avenue des Champs Elysées. The Sûreté, in combination with the Danish detective service, are still trying to clear up the affair. You and I can do it," he said; and, after a pause, he looked Rayne straight in the face, and asked: "Shall we? It rests with you!"

Rayne frowned darkly. Never before had I witnessed such an evil look upon the face of any man. I knew that his brain was working swiftly, and I also saw that our visitor was most unwelcome – evidently an accomplice who had managed by some unaccountable means to penetrate the veil of secrecy in which the super-crook had always so successfully enveloped his identity.

"Well," he laughed. "You really are a most dramatic person, Signor Gori, or whatever your name may be. I really don't understand you, unless you are attempting to blackmail me. And if you are, then I'll get my servant to show you the door."

The stranger smiled meaningly, and asked quite quietly:

"Is it not to your advantage, Signor Rayne, to talk this little matter over in a friendly spirit? I offer you the opportunity. If you refuse it – " And he shrugged his shoulders meaningly, without concluding his sentence.

Rayne was silent for a few seconds. Then he said in quite a changed and genial tone:

"I am much mystified at your visit, Signor Gori, for I certainly have no knowledge of you. But the hour is late. If you are staying

in the neighborhood could you call again at noon to-morrow, when we will go further into this tangled affair? We seem to be at cross-purposes to-night.”

“As you wish,” replied the visitor, bowing with exquisite politeness. “I am staying at the Fleece Hotel, at Thirsk, and I have motored out here. To-morrow at noon I will call upon you.” And then he added in a hard, relentless tone: “And then I trust your memory will be refreshed. Signori, I wish you both *buona sera*.”

“Stay! I quite forgot! I shall not be here to-morrow,” Rayne replied quickly. “I have to be out some part of the day, and also I expect visitors.”

“Then the day after?” suggested the visitor politely, to which Rayne sullenly replied:

“Yes. The day after to-morrow, at six o’clock in the evening. I will be here to see you, if you still persist in pestering me. But I warn you, Signor Gori, that it is quite useless.”

The Italian smiled, bowed, and again wishing us good night, crossed the room as Rayne pressed the electric button for the servant.

I realized that a big cloud of trouble had unexpectedly descended upon Overstow. When he had gone Rayne broke out into a furious series of imprecations and vows of vengeance upon some person whom he did not name, but whom he suspected of having made a *faux pas*.

Suddenly, however, he bade me good night in his usual manner, as though nothing had occurred to disturb him. He was

a man of abnormal intellect, defiant, fearless, and with a brain which, had it been put to proper usage, would undoubtedly have made him a world-famous Englishman. After all, the brains of great criminals, properly cultivated and directed, are the same brains as those possessed by our great leaders, whether political, commercial, or social.

That night I scarcely closed my eyes in sleep. The Damoclean sword had apparently fallen upon the Squire of Overstow. And I recollected his daughter's warning.

Next morning, directly after breakfast, which he ate with relish, and seemed quite his normal self, I drove with him at his orders over to Heathcote Hall, about five miles away, where lived Sir Johnson Burnham, one of the old Yorkshire aristocracy, who was also chairman of quarter sessions.

I waited at the wheel while he called. I knew that the baronet was not at home, as a week before Lola had told me that he had gone to San Remo. Nevertheless, Rayne went inside, and was there quite half an hour. I was puzzled at his absence, but the reason seemed plain when the butler, bowing him out, exclaimed:

"I am so sorry, Mr. Rayne, but the telephone people are, I fear, very slack in these days. It takes so long to get a number."

So Rayne had gone to Heathcote in order to telephone to somebody in great urgency – somebody he dare not speak with from Overstow.

As we drove back again, Rayne said:

"Of course, George, you will never breathe a word of this –

well, this little *contretemps*— or of its result. When I'm up against the wall I always hit hard. That's the only way. I'm not going to be blackmailed!"

"The affair does not concern me," I replied. "What I hear in your presence I never repeat."

"I'm glad you appreciate your position," he answered. "I'm a good employer to those who trust me, but an infernally bad one to those who doubt, who blunder, or who betray me, as you have probably learned," he said in a hard voice, as we swung into the handsome lodge gates of Overstow.

Just before luncheon Rayne was called to the telephone. I was in the room at the time. He apparently recognized the voice, and scribbled something upon the pad before him.

"Will you repeat that?" he asked. "I want to be quite clear."

Then he listened again very intently.

"Right! I'll be with you at ten to-night," he replied, and then hung up the receiver.

"I must go to London," he said, turning to me. "You'll drive me into York, and I can catch the four-thirty up. You stay here and meet that Italian chap to-morrow at six, and tell him that I'm up at Half Moon Street. Give him my address, and ask him to see me there. After you've seen him, start in the car for London and carry out the instructions I gave you on Monday."

Then he went to his room, changed his clothes, and came down to lunch in very bright spirits. It seemed that by the Italian's visit he was now not in the least perturbed.

I drove him with Lola to York, where he went to London and Lola to Scarborough. Afterwards I dined at the Station Hotel alone, and returned to Overstow, which seemed chill and lonely. The local doctor happily looked in during the evening, and I played him a game at billiards.

In impatient curiosity I waited until next day, when, punctually at six o'clock, Signor Gori was shown into a little room adjoining the great hall, and there I joined him in the capacity of a busy man's secretary.

"I much regret, Signor Gori," I said, after we had bowed, "but Mr. Rayne was called to London quite unexpectedly upon some very urgent business. He presents his apologies and asks whether you can manage to meet him in London when it is convenient to you. Will you telephone to him?" And I gave him the address of Rayne's rooms.

"His apologies!" echoed the Italian, with a very marked accent and a gesture of ridicule. "The apologies of 'The Golden Face'! Ah! my dear friend, you are his secretary; you are not the principal in this very serious affair."

"Serious. How?" I asked in pretense of ignorance, and hoping thereby to learn something.

"*Madonna Santa!* You do not know – you do not realize the depths of that man's villainy! I do! I am the one person who has penetrated the veil of secrecy beneath which he has so long remained hidden. Quérot, of the Paris Sûreté, and Tetani, of the Public Security of Italy, are my friends. I can now go to them,

as I shall.”

“My dear sir!” I exclaimed. “The matter is no affair of mine! I am simply a paid secretary to do Mr. Rayne’s correspondence, and sometimes to drive his car. There my engagement ends.”

“Then be very careful! Be warned by me!” the Italian cried, gazing at me very seriously. “This man, your employer, is the leader of the most wonderfully organized gang of criminals in Europe. I happen to know.”

“How?” I asked.

He looked at me strangely, and his manner changed. His dark eyes seemed to search mine, and then next instant he smiled mysteriously.

“I will tell you the truth,” he said. “The reason I know is because I have unwittingly – owing to a little lapse from the path of honesty – been made one of the tools of this man whose marvelous brain controls the actions of dozens of the most unscrupulous and dangerous thieves on the Continent. My suspicions were aroused by something a woman told me in Paris, and for many months I have been unceasing in my inquiries. I have at last discovered the well-concealed chief who gives his orders like a general in the field, and those orders are obeyed to the letter without question, and always to the profit of those who execute them. And here,” he added, gazing around, “I am in the fine house of the man of mystery for whom the police are ever seeking – ‘The Golden Face’!”

“What you have said certainly surprises me,” I replied. “Surely

there must be some mistake. Mr. Rayne is not the leader of a criminal gang. He is simply a country landowner here.”

“Under that guise he poses unsuspected by the police,” laughed my visitor. “You can rest assured that I have made every inquiry and that now I know.”

“And what are your intentions?” I asked. “Surely you will go and see him in London?”

The truth was out, and I saw that the Italian meant mischief.

“Perhaps I shall go to the police at once,” he said. “Perhaps I shall go to London. I shall consider. He made an appointment and he has broken his promise. He fears me! That is quite plain. But, signore, I am here in England to bring him to justice, if only for one very serious crime – a crime that a woman witness I have can prove!”

“This is all very distressing to me, especially as Mr. Rayne has a daughter, a young lady who is entirely ignorant of her father’s source of income,” I said.

“Ignorant!” he echoed. “Ah! my dear signore, do not think the Signorina Lola is ignorant! I have waited and watched. I know more than you or Signor Rayne ever suspect. The girl may affect ignorance, but she knows, and I can prove it!”

His words caused me to start. I certainly did not like the man’s attitude, for whatever I said, or whatever pretense I made, he refused to be appeased. All I could do in the circumstances was to express regret that Mr. Rayne had been compelled to go to London, and to again ask him to call at Half Moon Street.

His allegations against Lola incensed me. I tried to obtain from him further details of his allegations, but he remained mysterious and triumphant. So in that spirit he left me, and departed in the car he had hired from Thirsk.

After a hurried dinner I got out the Rolls, filled up the tank, and set out on the long journey to London. As hour after hour I swept along the great North Road, my big headlights glaring before me, I felt more than ever apprehensive.

Could it be that the bald-headed man had actually discovered the leading spirit of the great gang of which I could only suppose he had been an unimportant member? If so, then for my own safety I ought to warn Rayne of his peril. Yet it was all hateful to me. I had been inveigled into that untenable position which I held, and now escape was impossible. I felt, however, in honor bound to protect Lola, even though that Italian crook had made those airy allegations against her.

I drove on through the night against a pelting rain that fell between Grantham and Stamford, but at the Wansford cross-roads it cleared up, and gradually the gray dawn showed.

It was half-past eight when I drove into the garage off the Tottenham Court Road, and I took a taxi to the Great Central Hotel, where I had a wash and a sleep till noon.

Then I went round to Half Moon Street, but found that Rayne was at the Automobile Club. I found him there just as he was going in to lunch with two ladies whom I had never before seen.

My presence seemed to alarm him, for with excuse he left the

ladies and took me out into the big hall.

There I told him of Gori's visit and of his threats.

He laughed.

"I only hope he will come and see me, George," he said. "But somehow, I don't think he will! You know now what to do. Madame is alone at the Carlton and ready to accompany you. I'm sorry I can't give you lunch, George, but I have two guests. I shall be anxious to know how you get on. Telephone to me in confidence after you've been to Ripley, won't you? Good-by."

And he passed across the hall and rejoined his two smartly dressed guests, crooks, like himself, I supposed.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SIGN OF NINETY-NINE

At half-past eight I called for Duperré's wife at the hotel, and she came down wearing a plain, dark-brown motor coat with a small, close-fitting cap to match. She was, indeed, unusually dowdy in appearance.

"Well, George," she exclaimed, as she sat behind me in the car and I drove down Pall Mall, "we're going out on a little adventure, I understand. Do you know where we're going?"

"Down to Ripley, on the Portsmouth Road," I replied. "I have to meet a man named Houston at the Talbot Hotel. That's all I know," I answered.

"Yes," she said. "I know Houston. We must be careful to-night – very careful."

We went through the crooked roads of Kingston and out through Surbiton towards Ditton, when, after a long silence, she exclaimed as she bent towards me:

"Tell me, George, have you ever heard the name of Gori, and if so, in what connection? I ask this in confidence between ourselves, as the outcome may mean much to both of us."

"I don't quite understand you, Madame," was my polite reply. "I only wish your husband had asked that question."

"Look here," she said in a low, tense voice, "you love Lola!

I know you do. Then will you, for her sake, reply to me openly and frankly? Have you in these past few days met a bald-headed Italian named Luigi Gori? And in what circumstances?"

I remained silent for some minutes. Then I said:

"I have met a man named Gori. He called upon Rudolph."

"When?" she gasped.

"He called on Monday night."

Madame Duperré held her breath for a few moments. She seemed to be calculating.

"I recognize certain grave probabilities in Gori's visit," she said, and then lapsed again into silence.

Presently I pulled up before the big old seventeenth-century posting-house in the long, quiet village of Ripley, once noted in the late Victorian craze of the "push-bike" as being the Mecca of the daring cyclist who ran out of London and back.

The great gateway through which the mail coaches for Portsmouth used to rumble was dark and cavernous, but on the right I saw a small door, and opening it found myself in a very low-ceiled but cosy bar, in which burned a great log fire with shining pewters above it. The Talbot is nothing if not a link with the days of the highwaymen of Weybridge Heath. Few inns in England are so unspoiled by modern improvements as the Talbot, at Ripley.

In the rather dim light of that low-pitched, well-warmed inn parlor, with its wide, inviting chimney-corner, I saw four men. One of them, facing the firelight, I recognized from the

photographs Rayne had shown me – the man with the moonstone in his tie.

I ordered my drink loudly, and looked him full in the face. Then, when a few moments later I had drunk it, I wished the barman good night and went out. Reëntering the car, I drove out of the village towards Guildford, and there waited expectantly. In ten minutes he came out of the darkness.

“Mr. Hargreave?” he asked, and, after replying, I invited him inside the car, whereupon he at once recognized Madame in the half-light. It was plain that they were known to each other.

“I expected Vincent would be with you. Where is he?” asked the man named Houston.

“He’s away. I don’t know exactly where he is,” Madame replied. “But what game are we going to play to-night?”

“A very merry one. It may be amusing, it may be tragic,” was the man’s reply. “We’re picking up May Cranston at Horsley Station presently.”

“May Cranston!” echoed Madame, astounded. “I thought she went to America after that affair in Dinard!”

“So she did, but she’s back again. May is a pretty shrewd girl, you know.”

“I’m well aware of that. But why are we meeting her?”

“She’ll probably tell you,” was the fellow’s reply, and, at his direction, I turned the car into a narrow side road which ran for miles through woods and coppices until at last, after passing through two small villages, we came to a wayside station dimly

lit by oil lamps.

There we waited for about a quarter of an hour, when the slow train from Waterloo ran in, and from a first-class carriage there stepped a tall, well-dressed girl wearing a rich fur coat and small hat. She was evidently expecting the car to meet her, for she walked straight up to it and entered, being greeted by Madame and Houston, who were inside.

I followed the newcomer and got into the driver's seat, whereupon Madame introduced me.

The moment she opened her lips I knew she was American, and also from her speech and expressions I knew that she was a crook who moved in good society.

"We'll drive through Merrow and over to Hindhead," Houston said. "We'd better avoid the High Street of Guildford, for the police might possibly spot the car. So we'll go by the side roads. I was over there three days ago on a motor-bike, so I'll pilot you."

And then he turned to gossip merrily with the good-looking American girl, who seemed most enthusiastic concerning our mysterious adventure.

"To-night ought to bring us a clear twenty thousand pounds," he said.

"More, my dear Teddy," the girl replied. "But since I saw you in Chicago four months ago I've had a very narrow squeak. I was nearly pinched by old Shenstone from New York. Dicky Diamond gave me the tip, and I cleared out from my hotel just in time. Had to leave all my trunks and eight thousand dollars'

worth of jewelry behind me. And now I dare not claim them, for the police have seized them. Somebody gave me away, but I don't know who. Wouldn't I like to know – just! You bet I'd get even on them!"

"A good job you were warned," said Madame. "Dicky was over here last June. I spent the evening with him at Prince's."

"He's over here now. Waiting for me in Liverpool. I've got my passage booked back for to-morrow night, so if the hue and cry is raised I shall have left. I'm in the passengers' list as Mrs. George C. Meredith, wife of the well-known Chicago stock-broker. See my ring!" she laughed, holding up her hand in the semi-darkness. "Ain't it a real fine one? And you are my mother, Madame! See?"

"But where are we going?" asked Duperré's wife.

"Going to make an unexpected call upon old Bethmeyer," she replied.

"Bethmeyer!" I exclaimed. "What, old Sir Joseph Bethmeyer, the millionaire whom they call the mystery man of Europe, the man who is said to have a finger in every financial pie all over Europe?"

"Yes, I guess it's the same man," replied our sprightly companion. "He lives at Frenbury Park, a splendid place between Hindhead and Farnham."

What, I wondered, could they possibly want with Sir Joseph Bethmeyer, the man who had, it was said, been behind the ex-Emperor Carl in his endeavor to regain the throne of the Hapsburgs, and who was declared to be immensely wealthy,

though the source of his great riches could never be discovered. I knew him from the photographs so frequently in the papers, a stout, full-bearded, Teutonic-looking man, who claimed Swedish nationality, and who frequently gave large sums to charity, apparently in order to propitiate the British Government, who were more than suspicious of his oft-repeated good intentions.

At Houston's suggestion we stopped at a small hotel in Godalming, and there had supper, for it was yet early, and the American girl had dropped a hint that we should not go near Frenbury till past midnight. As we sat at table in a private room, I saw that she was exceedingly handsome, with a pair of coal-black eyes and a shrewd, alert expression, but her American accent was not always pronounced. Indeed, when she liked, she could conceal it altogether.

She wore a fine diamond bracelet, her only ornament. Yet during our meal Houston whispered something to her, whereupon she half drew from beneath her fur coat something that glinted in the light, and I saw it was a very serviceable-looking revolver.

A few moments later we heard a car pull up, and a heavy-booted man entered the hall of the hotel. The door of our room opened, and a thick-set, clean-shaven man of about forty glanced in inquisitively, almost instantly shutting the door again.

Next second May Cranston sprang to her feet with blanched face and terrified eyes.

“That's Hedley! – old Bethmeyer's secretary! If he's

recognized me, then the game is up," she whispered hoarsely.

"But did he?" queried Houston, who sat next to her. "I don't think he noticed anybody. He simply saw that this was a private party and withdrew. He's evidently gone to the bar."

"He's on his way to Frenbury from London, no doubt," said the girl.

"Don't go farther if you think there's any risk," Madame urged.

"But it must be done, and to-night!" the girl said. "Remember I leave Liverpool to-morrow evening if there's trouble, and you – my mother – have got to see me off!"

"I'll go into the bar and watch him," I volunteered, and rising, I went to a kind of pigeon-hole which gave access to the bar, and through which I could see into the room beyond. The man whom Miss Cranston had recognized as Hedley was smoking a cigarette and calmly drinking a whisky-and-soda. Afterwards I walked to the door and saw that the car was turned towards London, a reassuring fact which I reported to my companions.

"Then he's going away from Frenbury, and won't be at home to-night!" cried the American girl gleefully.

When he had gone we drove nearly to Petersfield, and it was considerably past midnight when, on our return, we descended that long hill which leads from Hindhead. Then, after turning off the main road for some time, we came to a narrow lane which led into a dark wood, where Houston suddenly stopped me and ordered me to switch out the lights.

Scarcely had I done this when two men emerged mysteriously from the shadow, and one of them, addressing Houston, said:

“You’re pretty punctual, Teddy! Sam isn’t here yet. He’s walking from Haslemere.”

“No! he’s here all right!” exclaimed a voice clearly in the darkness, as a third man came forward.

“May is in the car,” Houston explained. “Is everything ready?”

“Yes; when you get along here fifty yards more you can see the house. The old fellow sleeps in the first-floor room on the corner. The light has just been switched off, so he’s gone to bed all right.”

Meanwhile the American girl had stepped from the car, and, greeting them all as “boys,” listened to what was said.

“Let’s hope the old boy will sleep comfortably, eh?” she laughed gayly. “If he doesn’t it will be the worse for him! His wife is in Paris, or she might prove a bit of trouble to us.”

“I know the ground exactly,” remarked one of the three men. “I wasn’t in service here as footman for six weeks for nothing,” he added with a laugh.

“Well, come on,” said Houston, who seemed to be the leader of the adventures. “Let’s get to work,” and, picking up a bag which one of the men had put down, he pressed into my hand a short, circular electric torch, saying:

“Be careful not to press the button, because when the light is switched on the shot is fired! Only you might require it. One never knows! Come on.”

May Cranston walked noiselessly with us, while in front the three men stalked quietly, speaking only in low whispers. Soon we came to a path which led into a great park, which we skirted, keeping still in the shadow of the trees, for the moon, though nearly gone, still shed some unwelcome light. The silence was only broken by our footsteps on the leaves. Silhouetted against the sky was the magnificent old castle-like mansion with many turrets in which dwelt the world's mystery man of finance.

At last we approached quite close to the house, and, crossing the broad terrace, we halted at the direction of our guide who had acted as footman there.

Before us was a row of long French windows. One of these the man known as Sam attacked in a methodical way with a short steel jimmy, and in a few moments he had noiselessly opened it, and while somebody showed a torch, we all entered what was, I found, a long and luxurious drawing-room.

“Mr. Hargreave! You remain here!” said the girl Cranston, who now assumed the leadership. “If occasion arises don't hesitate to use your torch. All you have to do is to keep this way of retreat open. Leave all the rest to us.”

Then, still guided by the ex-footman, she disappeared with the four men.

What was intended I could not guess. We had broken into one of the most magnificent houses in England, and no doubt an extensive burglary had been planned.

I waited in the big, dark room for nearly twenty minutes,

when suddenly I heard heavy, stumbling footsteps returning, and became conscious that the men, aided by the woman, were carrying with them a heavy human form. It was enveloped in black cloth and trussed up firmly with stout rope.

“Say, are you all right, Mr. Hargreave?” inquired the American girl-crook.

I replied in the affirmative, whereupon she whispered: “Good! Come right along. It’s worked beautifully. The old boy started up to see me at his bedside, and put on his dressing-gown to talk to me. Oh! it was real fun! He dared only speak in a whisper for fear the servants overheard. I told him I was thirsty, and he took me into his study. We had drinks, and I put him quietly to sleep with a couple of drops of the soothing syrup. When he comes to himself he’ll have the shock of his life. Six months ago in Philadelphia – when I wanted some money – he defied me. Now it will cost the old skinflint a very big sum if he wants to see the light of day again! If he won’t pay up, well, we are none the worse off, are we?”

A quarter of an hour later they had placed the unconscious form of Sir Joseph in the car, and, bidding farewell to the three stalwart men, who were, no doubt, professional thieves from London, we started back swiftly through Farnham and Aldershot, thence by way of Reading and along the Bath Road to a lonely house somewhere outside Hounslow, where the American girl stopped me.

There the unconscious man was carried in, and while the

others remained in the house – which I think had been taken furnished and specially for the purpose – I was ordered to return to London alone, which I did, most thankful to end that exciting night’s adventure.

On my return to the garage off the Tottenham Court Road at half-past three in the morning, the man on duty told me that a man’s voice had inquired for me about nine o’clock.

“He seemed very anxious indeed to find you. But he told me to give you a number – number ninety-nine! Sounds like a doctor, eh, sir?” remarked the man.

I stood aghast at the message.

“Are you sure that was the number?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. I wrote it down here. He gave a Mayfair telephone number,” and he showed me the note he had made.

It was a message from Rayne! That number was the one agreed upon by all of us as a signal that some extreme danger had occurred, and it became necessary for us all to keep apart and disperse.

I got into the car and drove out of the garage again, not knowing how to act. In Oxford Street, at that hour silent and deserted, I drew up, and, taking a piece of paper from my notebook, I wrote down the figures “99,” and, placing it in a small envelope which I fortunately found in my wallet, I addressed it to Madame Duperré, and left it with the night porter at the Carlton, urging him to give it to her immediately on her return.

Then I drove to the Strand telegraph office, and thence

dispatched a well-guarded message to Lola at Scarborough, telling her to meet me without fail at the Station Hotel at Hull that afternoon and bring her passport with her.

This she did, and when we met I told her of her father's unwelcome visitor, the man Gori, and that he feared the police. Both of us decided to pose as runaway lovers and leave the country, which we did, I having succeeded in obtaining two berths upon a Wilson steamer crossing to Bergen.

It was not until a week later that we read in the English newspapers the sensation caused by the arrest of Mr. Rudolph Rayne of Overstow Hall, Yorkshire, upon an extradition warrant applied for by the Danish Government. The prisoner had been brought up at Bow Street, and, after certain mysterious evidence had been given, he had been remanded.

In due course Rayne was conveyed to Copenhagen, where he was tried for complicity in a great bank fraud on the Danish National Bank, and sent to twenty years' penal servitude. Hence to the British public Rayne's actual activities were never revealed.

I can only suppose that my warning to Madame had its effect, and that she, her husband and all her friends took flight.

Whether they obtained the money they sought as ransom for old Sir Joseph Bethmeyer I know not. Probably they did, for nothing appeared in the papers concerning his disappearance.

Eventually I succeeded in getting Lola safely to her aunt in Paris, where, though her father's downfall is still a great blow to her, she is living in peace under another name, while I have found

honest employment in the office of a French shipping company in Bordeaux.

Lola is my fiancée, and we are to be married next June. One subject, however, we have mutually agreed never to mention, namely, the evil machinations and ingenious activities of her father, the man who had, for some mysterious reason of his own, ascertained that I could sing, and who, in overconfidence at his own cunning, was at last unmasked – “The Golden Face.”